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**FEMINISM AND THE EMERGING NATION IN EL SALVADOR**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

**by**

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**May 2011**

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## Personal Statement

Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit priest and internationally recognized scholar at the University of Central America, argues injustice is evident in this world. A crucified people exist and they suffer constant institutionalized violence through a lack of education, lack of health care, and a lack of basic necessities. Hunger, sickness, slums, frustration, abuse, violence, and unemployment are commonplace for the crucified people. “Poverty is the instrument of death, either slowly through unjust structures that make it extremely difficult to meet the most basic needs of life, or rapidly and violently through the repression that brings forth and maintains these unjust structures”.<sup>1</sup> For Sobrino, justice refers to seeing this brokenness, seeing this suffering, and responding to it with compassion. “To react with mercy means to do everything we possibly can to bring them down from the cross”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, compassion is the primary response to suffering, a compassion that is intent on eliminating such suffering. To better understand suffering and to work towards eliminating it from the world it is necessary is to analyze and to write with the firm intent of one day proceeding with action. We write because we must do something and in writing we bear witness and protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Sobrino 1994, 32

<sup>2</sup> Sobrino 1994, 10

The terms injustice, poverty, and suffering were nothing but abstract concepts taught to me through my Catholic education and had little impact on my decisions and goals in life until I met, got to know, and grew to love people whose everyday lives are marked with injustice, suffering, poverty. After a summer living in and accompanying the children in Hogar Suyapa, a Catholic orphanage in El Progreso, Honduras, and a semester of academic and praxis experience in San Salvador, El Salvador, these words are no longer theoretical concepts, but rather words with vivid and personal representations. Although injustice retains the meaning in which someone receives unfair actions or treatment, it more importantly refers to the low wages and brutal workdays Magali faces while working in the coffee fields. Poverty refers to a situation in which a person has below a necessary income to support themselves and their family, but also refers to Myra and her inability to earn a sufficient income to provide clean water for her children. Finally the word suffering does not simply imply pain and anguish, but the image of 20 malnourished children laying in their cribs fighting for their lives. Therefore, my experiences in Honduras and El Salvador have made personal the issue of social justice and impelled to me respond with compassion. Thus, through this thesis process I have researched, reflected, and written in an attempt to better educate and prepare myself to enter the world more capable to respond and act with compassion.

Annie Dillard demonstrates, “You cannot mend the chromosome, quell the earthquake, or stave the flood. You cannot atone for dead tyrants’ murders, and you

cannot alone stop living tyrants”.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, I cannot fix the world; rid it of its evil and sadness. However, Martin Buber writes, “The world of ordinary days affords us that precise association with God that redeems both us and our speck of the world. God entrusts and allots to everyone an area to redeem”.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to act with compassion means to redeem the small area of the world that God has allotted to me. If I am to be damned following this life, my only hope is that I am not among the passive who “witnessed evil and lifted neither an arm nor voice to stop it... witnessed joy and neither sang or clapped their hands”.<sup>5</sup> When I see a child, like Moses, a little boy in Las Delicias, El Salvador, bruised and beaten, unlike his mother, I must act.

Furthermore, God needs us. Meister Eckhard argues, “God needs man. God needs man to disclose him, complete him, and fulfill him... His name is holy but it is up to us to sanctify it; his reign is universal, but it is up to us to make him reign; his will be done, but it is up to us to accomplish it”.<sup>6</sup> God, therefore, needs women and men on earth to work for justice, to work for love. As Rabbi Tarfon said, “the work is not yours to finish, but neither are you free to take no part in it”.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, this thesis is the first step of my journey towards responding to the suffering of this world with compassion and action. It has provided me with the opportunity to educate myself further, to reflect, and to critically analyze injustice in an attempt to formulate a plan of compassionate action. The children in Honduras and the

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<sup>3</sup> Dillard 2000, 201

<sup>4</sup> Dillard 2000, 201

<sup>5</sup> Dubus 2001, 63

<sup>6</sup> Dillard 2000, 195

<sup>7</sup> Dillard 2000, 205



men and women who have forever impacted my life in El Salvador have inspired this work. I proceed with the hope that this thesis not only does them and their contribution to the person I have become justice, but also in some way leads to more justice in this broken world.

## Glossary of Important Terms

ADEMUSA Women	Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas, The Association of Salvadoran Women
AMES Salvador	Asociación de Mujeres de El Salvador, The Association of Women in El Salvador
AMPES	Asociación de Mujeres de El Salvador, The Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador.
ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance
CEMUJER	Centro de Estudios de la Mujer “Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera”, Women’s Studies Center “Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera”
CONAMUS	Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Salvadoreñas, National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women
Co-Madres	Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados de El Salvador “Monseñor Romero”, Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador “Monsignor Romero”
DIGNAS	Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida “Rompamos el silencio”, Women for Dignity and Life “Breaking the Silence”
ERP	Ejercito Revolucionario Del Pueblo, The People’s Revolutionary Army, Formed in 1971 by dissident Christian Democrats and other leftists
FDR	Democratic Revolutionary Front, Political wing of the revolutionary coalition: coalition of dissident Christian Democrats, Marxists priests, professionals, and the popular organizations, aligned with the FMLN
RN	Fuerzas Populares Armadas de Resistencia Nacional, The Armed Forces of National Resistance formed in 1975 by a faction of the ERP

FMLN	Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberación Nacional, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front
FPL-FM	Fuerzas Populares de Liberación- Farabundo Marti, The Popular Forces for Liberation “Farabundo Marti”, a radical wing of the Salvadoran Communist Party
IMU	Instituto para la Investigación, Capacitación, y Desarrollo de la Mujer, Institute for Research, Training, and Development of Women
MNR	Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, National Revolutionary Movement
ORDEN	Organización Democrática Nacionalista. Established in 1963Rural Paramilitary organization set up by the government
PCS	Partido Comunista Salvadoreño, Salvadoran Communist Party
PDC	Christian Democratic Party

## **An Introduction into El Salvador and the Emerging Nation**

Magali, a 21-year-old Salvadoran woman with long dark hair and deep dark eyes lives in a small town outside of the city of San Salvador. The scars of the 12 year Salvadoran Civil War are visible throughout Magali's home town: poor access to water, gang violence, faded FMLN paintings on buildings, inadequate access to healthcare and education, and the stories of lost loved ones. For Magali the story of the Civil War is just that--a story. A devastating story that impacts her daily life, but not a lived reality.

Magali's mother, however, watched the Civil War take hold of her country and faced the devastating consequences: armed violence in her town, the loss of neighbors and friends, and overt repression by the military.

Magali's life is different from her mother's. She did not witness the armed revolution, but she still faces many of the same issues her mother faced. Magali did not complete high school, only the eighth grade because her mother could not afford the necessary uniform, shoes, and notebooks. Completing the eighth grade, however, is a feat for someone living in Magali's town. Her father left her family when she was ten years old. Unemployed, he was a violent drunk, and would beat Magali, her mother, and her younger brother. After dropping out of school, Magali went to work both in the coffee fields and at the local maquila. The work is back breaking, and she receives poor treatment and a poor salary. She tells stories of the maquila--not being allowed to sit

down for hours at a time, dangerous working conditions, male supervisors making inappropriate jokes and advances toward women. This is normal, commonplace, accepted. She goes home to a lamina house kept together by sticks and mud. There are two bedrooms, a *pila* near the fence and a small oven where she makes tortillas with her mother.

Magali's life is marked by constant struggle, the struggle to make enough money to buy corn and make tortillas, to purchase clean drinking water, and to support her younger brother so he can complete school. Like most women in El Salvador, Magali faces gender-based violence, the cyclical nature of poverty, and economic marginalization in her everyday life. However, Magali is unlike the majority of poor women in her town and in El Salvador. At the age of 21 she remains childless and receives monthly birth control shots, a stark difference from most women who have their first child at 15 and have little to no formal sex education. She rejects the violence and discrimination she faces in her work place even though she can do little to stop or prevent it. She attends regular community meetings and despite her inability to finish her formal education, she fights to learn about issues facing her country. Magali has been influenced by the Grupo de Mujeres, or women's organization formed in her town by a scholarship student attending the University. Her participation in this group has changed the way she views herself as a Salvadoran woman. Magali's life is an example of the impact the feminist organizations are having in El Salvador.

## **Thesis Statement**

In the Civil War that plagued El Salvador from 1980 to 1992 lie the roots of the struggle to survive for the Salvadoran people, especially for women. Women were affected in tragic ways, yet women were also active participants serving as high-ranking officers, as combatants, as messengers, and as support staff to the FMLN. The impact of the war and the organizational skills women gained from their participation led them to a feminist consciousness which then led them focus on their own their needs as women, to develop a feminism unique to El Salvador, and to develop organizations to address their needs. The feminist organization are realigning the national values of El Salvador and are creating a new organic national narrative through the reconstruction of gender roles, the promotion of new national heroes, and legislation which mandates the infusion of new national values such as respect, equality, and responsibility. The feminist organizations are the most effective force creating a new organic national narrative for the new nation that is emerging in El Salvador.

## **The Emergence of A New Nation**

In El Salvador a new nation is emerging. A nation based on respect, equality, and responsibility. This new nation is forming on the heels of a bloody 12-year Civil War and a long history of violence and overt repression. There are differing types of nationalism and different types of nations, those that inspire solidarity and equality and those, which value oppression and exclusion. “A nationalism grounded on *jus soli* can in principle assist neighbors of different languages and cultures inclusively to live together and accept

one another as members of a single national society, while a nationalism grounded on *jus sanguinis* is in principle exclusivist and intolerant”.<sup>1</sup> The nation and nationalism forming in El Salvador today is similar to other nationalisms based *jus soli* or the idea that citizenship is based birth in the nation rather than *jus sanguinis*, which dictates citizenship based on blood. The nationalism developing in El Salvador, however, attempts to surpass merely the idea of citizenship. The Salvadoran nationalism extends the view of members of the nations as simply citizens and strives to see the human nature and dignity in each of it’s individual citizens to create a nation based on respect, equality, and responsibility.

The stage for the emergence of this new nation is set and seen due to the following circumstances: the post-civil war status of the country, the internal threat posed by the war, the presence and departure of an external threat, the end of imperialism in El Salvador, the creation of a new creed through amendments to the Constitution, and the re-emergence of the indigenous population. It is due to the combination of these forces that has provided a fertile environment for the emergence of a new nation in El Salvador. As this new nation emerges, it is the feminist organizations that are most effectively influencing and directing the character of the nation. The influence of the feminist organizations on the new nation can be seen through the emergence of new values and beliefs, new national heroes, and new legislation that guides and directs the nation to be a nation built on the ideals of respect, equality, and responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Hastings 1997, 34

Before examining the development, work, and impact of the feminist organizations, it is necessary to examine the historical forces at work in El Salvador, namely the post-civil war status of the country, the internal threat posed by the war, the presence and departure of an external threat, the end of imperialism in El Salvador, the creation of a new creed through amendments to the Constitution, and the re-emergence of the indigenous population. An understanding of the impact of these forces provides a foundation upon which the development, work, and impact of the feminist organizations can be built.

### **Conflict and the Emerging Nation**

Adrian Hastings, a Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds argues that nations are largely created out of wars of liberation.<sup>2</sup> The Civil War in El Salvador was a war of liberation for the oppressed peoples of El Salvador. No longer were the people willing to suffer the injustices and live in dire poverty under the ruling land owning families and military dictatorships. Hastings demonstrates that “Nationalism often exists as a latent presence, something which flares up extremely quickly in times of war or some real or imagined threat and can then become overwhelmingly and irrationally strong”.<sup>3</sup>

The people of El Salvador have faced violent repression since before the 1930s. They faced both an external threat, the assistance provided by the United States, and the internal threat to their livelihoods, to their families, and to themselves. Throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> Hastings 1997, 161

<sup>3</sup> Hastings 1997, 163



war, the United States not only trained Salvadoran soldiers on U.S soil, but also provided \$6 billion dollars of aid to the military. The military used these funds and military skills to violently repress the Salvadoran people. The presence of these threats, external and internal, instigated the rise of nationalistic sentiments.<sup>4</sup> This combination of the external and internal threats, therefore, created a key constituent that allowed for the development of nationalism. As the violence and oppression escalated, so did the nationalism of the masses of El Salvador who wanted to build a society based on democracy and social justice. The threat of violence and the actual violence inflamed this nationalism and placed El Salvador on the path to emerge as a new and different nation from the violent and oppressed nation it had always been.

### **The End of Imperialism**

Also key to this new emerging nation in El Salvador was an end the imperialism in the country. The history of El Salvador is a history filled with external influences and imperialism. In 1524 Spain colonized the area of Cuscatlán, which is now referred to as El Salvador.<sup>5</sup> Before their arrival, several other civilizations had existed and flourished. From 1200 BC to 250 AD a small hunting and gathering society existed. However, in 200 AD a massive eruption of the Ilopango volcano destroyed this pre-classical civilization. In 600 AD, the Mayan civilization and culture were flourishing in the western part of the country. The Mayan society was based mainly on the cultivation of corn. Over the next two decades, the Mayan civilizations, as it did throughout Mesoamerica experienced

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<sup>4</sup> Hastings 1997, 4

<sup>5</sup> Cuscatlán refers to the land of Good Fortune. Murray 6, 1997

serious social and economic problems. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a new civilization, similar to the Aztecs in Mexico in language and culture, began to thrive in the Cuscatlán area. The Spanish referred to the indigenous people as the Pipiles, which is the Nahuatl word for children. The Pipiles constructed a more complex agricultural society than the Mayans, with a multilayered class structure, cultivated a variety of crops and participated in extensive trading. They utilized slash and burn techniques for the cultivation of corn, beans, squash, and other crops. All agricultural property was communal and there is no record of any forms of private property.<sup>6</sup>

The 1524 arrival of the Spanish in Cuscatlán signaled great social and cultural changes. Hernan Cortez, leader of the Spanish invasion of Mexico, sent one of his lieutenants, Pedro de Alvarado, to take control of Cuscatlán and convert the indigenous people to Catholicism. Alvarado was accompanied by 250 Spaniards and 5,000 indigenous Mexicans who had aligned themselves with Cortez. The Pipiles attempted to resist and in the first battle the leader of the Pipiles, Atlactl, shot an arrow through the thigh of Alvarado killing his horse and leaving him with a permanent limp. Regardless of the military experience and number of the Spanish army, it took 15 years of continual military campaigns to take control of Cuscatlán.<sup>7</sup>

Alvarado brutally suppressed the indigenous people through the use of scorched earth policies, not unlike the brutal strategies used during the Civil War. Following the victory against the Pipiles, the Spaniards renamed Cuscatlán El Salvador, the Savior, and quickly established a colonial administration. The Spanish colonial government created

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<sup>6</sup> Murray 7, 1997

<sup>7</sup> Murray 7, 1997

262 municipalities to extend their administrative control. These municipalities were of varying shapes and sizes, and only the largest had enough resources to support the municipality.<sup>8</sup>

To reward the Spanish conquistadors, the new administration gave them generous grants of the richest land and for the first time land became private property. To work this land, the administration created a system of forced labor or *encomiendas*, which put a certain number of the Pipiles under the protection of a Spaniard and obliged them to work the land of their master. The colonial administration began a process of gradual dispossession of the land from the indigenous population and by 1770, less than 500 Spaniards owned 1/3 of the land. The leading crop grown and exported at this time was indigo, the prized blue dye from the anil plant. Therefore, the Spanish instituted the agroexport system that would dominate the economy of El Salvador for centuries. The impact of the Spanish colonization crippled the indigenous population and anthropologists estimate that between 1524 and 1551, the indigenous population fell from 120,000 to 55,000.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1800s the colonial system began to fracture and the power of Spain began to weaken. In 1821, the *criollos* or the Latin American descendants of Spanish conquerors, declared the independence of El Salvador, as they saw the control of Spain as an unnecessary burden. Despite this new independence, the situation for the poor worsened under the rule of the *criollos*. In the Republic of El Salvador, only those landowners of Spanish descent had full participation. In 1833, the Nonualcos, an

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<sup>8</sup> Murray 33, 1997

<sup>9</sup> Murray 7, 1997

indigenous group living near present day San Vicente, rebelled against the *criollos*. The Criollo leadership quickly put down the rebellion and to discourage future rebellion, mounted the leader of the Nonualcos head on a stake and placed it in the plaza of San Vicente. To further obliterate any trace of the way of life of the indigenous populations, in 1881 and 1882, the Legislative Assembly abolished communal land.<sup>10</sup> This evident repression of the poor and indigenous populations began with the Spanish colonization and continued throughout the Civil War.

As during the time of the colonization, the landed oligarchy historically ruled all aspects of Salvadoran life, most importantly economic life. The landed oligarchy, mainly descendants of the Spanish conquerors, relied on the profits from exports of indigo and coffee to maintain their power and control over the country. Although El Salvador was no longer a colony, a trend of colonialism continued in the country not only in the structure of the agricultural economy, but also to foreign intervention and influence. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, US companies had battled British companies for control of rail and maritime transport, banking, and other strategic industries in El Salvador. The United States historically has been El Salvador's leading coffee customer, which has given the US considerable leverage and veto power over the country's internal affairs. Therefore, although El Salvador was no longer a colony of Spain, the imperialistic nature of the United States took advantage of the colonial structures and agroexport economy to exert their influence on the country. This influence continued and reached its peak as the violence and repression came to a head in El Salvador. The repression led to discontent,

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<sup>10</sup> Murray 9, 1997

discontent led to violence, and violence led to a full out civil war. Thus, another era of imperialism on the part of the United States took hold of El Salvador.

Under Presidents Carter and Reagan it was U.S policy to prevent a leftist government from coming to power in El Salvador. The purpose of the United States in El Salvador was simple: to prevent communists from coming to power and to return El Salvador to normalcy and stability. This action and direct involvement in El Salvador was arguably just another imperialist action. The U.S did not enter El Salvador for human rights. The involvement was contingent on the promotion of their agenda, anti communism. In fact, the human rights violations that took place were the result of the U.S providing funds and training to the military and continuing such funds even after prominent figures such as Romero, the 6 Jesuit Priests and four American nuns were murdered. Despite claims that the Salvadoran military had, with the aid given by the US, become a democratic force, “The murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter demonstrated the moral bankruptcy of the U.S government’s claim that a professionalized Salvadoran army had become a force for democratization”.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1980s the Salvadoran government received over 3.6 billion dollars from the United States, and at the conclusion of the war it had received over 8 million dollars. This direct involvement and the history of imperialism in El Salvador is imperative to the emerging sense of nationalism taking place in El Salvador today. Throughout history, El Salvador has encountered only brief periods of autonomy and has spent much of its long history under the imperial grasp of other nations.

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<sup>11</sup> Murray 15, 1997

Adrian Hastings' compelling argument about the impact of imperialism in Africa can be applied to the situation in El Salvador. Hastings argues, "If there had been a few more centuries of internal development, maybe the map would have been simplified through the incorporation of neighboring people by the more powerful states. In the real world, however, the countries of Europe, still attracted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the imagined profits of overseas rule, and faced with an almost complete power vacuum in Africa and, moreover, almost completely ignorant of its ethnic composition, inevitably, divided it up quite otherwise, marking out various large parcels, defined in simplest of geographical terms".<sup>12</sup>

This can be seen in El Salvador as well. El Salvador was never able to develop as a nation on its own terms. Instead, Spain and the United States made the crucial decisions for El Salvador. The Spanish designated the exact land area that would be El Salvador. They created the 262 municipalities to extend their administrative control and created these municipalities without heed to shape, size, or resources.<sup>13</sup> Hastings argues that the nation making process in Africa, although similar to the process that took place in Europe was stopped in its tracks. The European nations fueled by imagined profits and acting in ignorance towards the ethnic composition of Africa, divided it up into large parcels eliminating the process for the Africans to further develop and form nations themselves. "The political map of Africa, decided in the 1880s and 1890s by non Africans for their own purposes, has remained almost unaltered ever since."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the Spanish

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<sup>12</sup> Hastings 161

<sup>13</sup> Murray 34, 1997

<sup>14</sup> Hastings 160, 1997

divided up the area of Cuscatlán into municipalities without reference to the indigenous groups living there, the size of the land parcels, and the resources available to the populations living there. As in Africa, the European imperialism, focused on greed and fueled with ignorance, stopped potential Salvadoran nationhood from forming through their direct intervention. The map of the municipalities in El Salvador was decided in the 1524 and has remained unchallenged until recently.

The Spanish also designated the type of economy and the focus on indigo and coffee exportation. The United States then chose the government. The people of El Salvador have had little say in the development of their country. Thus, now with the conclusion of the Civil War and the conclusion of imperialism in El Salvador, a new nation and a new nationalism of the actual people of El Salvador is beginning to emerge.

The people of El Salvador can, for example, now choose the organization of their municipalities and their type of economic system. The municipality system of El Salvador, established by the Spanish, mirrored the corruption of the national government and excluded many from smaller municipalities from having any political power. Following the Civil War, despite intense polarization at the local level, the Salvadoran government decided to distribute post-war reconstruction funds through the municipalities. However, during the 1994 election, the FMLN candidates proposed a “new Municipalism” which would break with the past and create a more participatory local politics.<sup>15</sup> Although the FMLN was unable to make considerable gains and only won 15 of the municipalities, those small gains demonstrate that local politics are

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<sup>15</sup> FMLN or Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.

changing and that democratic structures at the local level are possible.<sup>16</sup> This small step forward could not have taken place had the influence of imperialism continued to dictate the working of the Salvadoran municipalities.

The shift in the economic system of El Salvador is another important illustration of the end of imperialism in El Salvador. The emergence of a new nation is demonstrated through the quest for economic independence. Emerging nations often stress the need for obtaining economic independence and reducing the influence of foreign firms and foreign nations in their nations economies. Limits are placed on the role of foreign investment and emerging nations implement policies to prevent the exploration of mineral and petroleum resources.<sup>17</sup> Although El Salvador has not yet reached this place in reference to their economic policies, there have been sweeping changes in the economic system of El Salvador that have created an environment in which a new nation can develop. The post-war period was influenced by the economic policies of a succession of ARENA governments, which championed free markets and the demise of the agricultural economy. Today in El Salvador, agriculture only represents a small fraction of El Salvador's GNP while in the past the country's wealthy lived by coffee and export crops and the poor fought to survive on agricultural wages and subsistence crops.<sup>18</sup> This shift in the economical system and changes in the workings of local municipalities demonstrate the conclusion of imperialism in El Salvador and the opportunity for the

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<sup>16</sup> Murray 34, 1997

<sup>17</sup> Alexander 110

<sup>18</sup> Brandt 67



Salvadoran people to form a nation based on the ideals, beliefs, and practices, which they themselves choose.

### **New Civic Creed**

The new civic or national creed created by amending the Constitution of 1983 is another important factor that has created the environment for a new nation to emerge. In March 1982, during the Civil War, a sixty-member constituent Assembly was elected to produce a new constitution. The document was expected to institutionalize certain reforms that were created by juntas during the Civil War. Following the Peace Accords, several mandated amendments were created to limit the role of the military within the new democracy that was forming. This embrace of democracy and check placed on the role of the military demonstrates the values of the emerging nation.

One important value emerging is the value of self-government. With the end of imperialism came the opportunity for the people of El Salvador to govern themselves. Historian Robert Wiebe extends of definition of nationalism as “the desire among people who believe they share a common ancestry and a common destiny to live under their own government on land sacred to their history.”<sup>19</sup> Such is the case in El Salvador. The FMLN joined together to combat oppression and violence in El Salvador, but also was created as an alternative to the currently ruling government. Through their participation in the Civil War and formation into a political party with the Peace Accords, the left in El Salvador gained a position of equality and an opportunity to participate in the political system.

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<sup>19</sup> Wiebe 2002, 5

This desire to live under one's own government is another factor that clearly demonstrates the emergence of this new nation in El Salvador.

### **Re-emergence of the Indigenous People**

The re-emergence of the indigenous people in El Salvador has also contributed to the emergence of this new nation in El Salvador. The re-emergence of the indigenous people represents the more accepting nature of the new nation that is forming. The re-emergence of the indigenous population has created an environment, where other population of Salvadoran society, namely the women and poor, feel as though they too can assert themselves and demand their rights. Salvadoran citizens, as well as foreigners, and academics have assumed until recently that no indigenous people remain in El Salvador. El Salvador has remained unusual in the Central American regions, where every other country has been grappling with indigenous populations and their quest for recognition.

The assumption that no indigenous population exists in El Salvador stems from the Massacre of 1932. That year, peasants of western El Salvador, mainly the Indian populations, rose up in rebellion led by the Communist Party against the government and the military leader General Martinez. The government responded swiftly and the rebellion was put down in a matter of days. "After tens of thousands of indigenous deaths in a matter of weeks, the Indians reputedly abandoned their ethnic identity, including their language and traditional dress, in order to survive."<sup>20</sup> Indigenous identity was

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<sup>20</sup> Ching 122

thought to be targeted through terror and indigenous dress and language were outlawed. The idea that the indigenous people of El Salvador, their oral tradition, and cultural characteristics were wiped out in 1932 was widely accepted by Salvadorans themselves, as well as academics.

Although many scholars have accepted this “Indian free nation”, there is much evidence that the Indian population was, in fact, not wiped out. The emergence of a more prominent indigenous culture in El Salvador illustrates this fact and alludes to the more accepting nature of the new nation that is forming in El Salvador.<sup>21</sup> Birth records kept through the Civil Registry initiated by the central government in 1860 recorded individuals racial identity until racial notation was eliminated from the registry in 1945. Racial notations included *ladino*, mixed Indian or non-Indian persons who lived according to European applied cultural norms, and *indígena* or *Indio*, which referred to people of indigenous descent.<sup>22</sup> The registration illustrated an increase in the birth rates of indigenous persons rather a decline following the Massacre of 1932. There is also evidence of a cluster of communities that maintained an indigenous Nahuatl communal identity expressed through artisan crafts and a language that incorporated both Spanish and Nahuatl.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is evident that the complete annihilation of the indigenous people of El Salvador was a false theory.

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<sup>21</sup> “Indian- free nation” is a term used by Erik Ching in *Indians, the Military, and the Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador*, page 123.

<sup>22</sup> Ladino refers to persons mixed Indian or non-Indian persons who lived in accord with European cultural norms. Indígena or Indio refers to people of indigenous descent.

<sup>23</sup> Ching 135

However, Indian tradition had been erased and abandoned due to fear of persecution after the massacre. Although some argue that the military did not in fact directly aim to eliminate the indigenous presence in El Salvador, many indigenous traditions were abandoned following the massacre. One can thus conclude this was the result of widespread persecution and fear. Despite this absence of indigenous traditions due to fear, “the Peace Accords inaugurated a new phase in virtually every aspect of Salvadoran society” and created an environment in which the indigenous population could step forward once again.<sup>24</sup> As many as 18 political organizations representing indigenous peoples have formed since 1990, whereas only one previously existed. The state created a Department of Indigenous Affairs in 1995, and more development initiatives targeting indigenous communities are under way. Therefore, the re-emergence of the indigenous population in El Salvador demonstrates that the new nation that is forming in El Salvador is more accepting. Therefore the post civil war status of El Salvador combined with an internal and external threat, the end of imperialism, the creation of a new civic creed, and the re-emergence of the indigenous population have created an environment in which a new nation can emerge.

## **Conclusion**

With the understanding that due to specific historical factors, the time is ripe for the formation of a new nation in El Salvador, the argument that it is the feminist organizations who are most effectively creating, influencing, and directing this new

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<sup>24</sup> Brandt 67

national narrative can be made. Therefore, this thesis explores the development, role, and impact of Salvadoran women's organizations in Salvadoran society. Key to understanding the historical implication of women in El Salvador is a review of the 12-year Civil War from 1980 to 1992 in chapter one. Chapter two takes a specific look towards the role of women in the war, and the impact of women and the roots of the development of women's organizations are demonstrated. The evolution of feminism, a feminism specific to El Salvador, is analyzed in chapter 3, to illustrate what is at the heart of the women's organizations. As it is these women's organizations that are creating the new organic national narrative, several key women's organizations, their values, their new national heroes and their legislative successes following the Civil War are illustrated in chapter four. This thesis thus argues that is the feminist organizations that are realigning the national values of El Salvador and are creating a new nation.

## Chapter 1: A Look into the History of El Salvador and the Civil War

### Introduction

In the 1970's in El Salvador, between 60 and 70% of the population were rural peasants living in mired poverty. In urban areas, there was only one doctor for every 3,592 Salvadorans. In the rural areas, there was one doctor for every 90,000 Salvadorans.<sup>25</sup> Three out of every four Salvadoran peasant children suffered from malnutrition. Diarrhea was the leading cause of death. The calorie intake for the country as a whole was 82% of the daily requirements in 1977. The top 10% of landowners had 78% of the arable land forcing peasants to survive as seasonal workers and subsistence farmers.<sup>26</sup> The majority of people lived in dire poverty. Christian democrat Jose Duarte described the situation in El Salvador best: "This is a history of people starving to death, living in misery. For fifty years the same people had all the power, all the money, all the jobs, all the education, all the opportunities."<sup>27</sup> There is little surprise that these conditions would fuel the 1980-1992 revolution in El Salvador.

### Root Causes of the Civil War

#### Economic Factors

The El Salvadoran Civil War was a bloody conflict between the military government and the guerilla rebellion, which resulted in the deaths of over 70,000 people.

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<sup>25</sup> Bonner 1984. 17

<sup>26</sup> Bonner 1984. 19

<sup>27</sup> Bonner 1984, 24,

In order to best understand this conflict and the implications it has for Salvadorans today, the root causes of the war must be analyzed. These root causes lay in historical, economic, and political factors. The economy of El Salvador has historically been based on an elitist structure, with a history of a landowning class that, although economically progressive, was politically conservative and unwilling to share any land with the peasantry. In the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, coffee rose to prominence in El Salvador and replaced indigo as the country's major export crop.

This expansion of coffee growing had a dramatic impact on the rural economy and social relations. Communal lands were transferred to private ownership through the laws of 1879, 1881, and 1882, which abolished all collective property.<sup>28</sup> This forced peasants off their lands and into the export crop economy as seasonal laborers or into subsistence farming. This transformation to governmental land contributed to landlessness and as more people found themselves without land, the standard of living dropped dramatically.<sup>29</sup> The situation only continued to deteriorate as following World War II, an increased demand for tropical foods such as coffee and bananas increased globally and the Salvadoran state thus encouraged industrialization. This was a successful move economically as by moving out of subsistence production and into agro export production, macro economic growth rates soared.

However, inequality also soared. The industrial development did not bring about any structural changes for the Salvadoran economy. The industrialization failed to absorb the peasants who had lost their land into the workforce, nor did it give rise to a new class

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<sup>28</sup> Byrne 1996, 18,

<sup>29</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 50

independent enough to push for societal change.<sup>30</sup> It was the success of capitalist development that provided the economic ingredient for the revolution.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in the dire historical economic situation clearly lies fuel for the revolution.

### **Political Factors**

However, an explanation of the causes of the war goes far beyond purely economic structures. The Salvadoran political system has been characterized by military rule backed by the landed oligarchy throughout the history of El Salvador.<sup>32</sup> The political order excluded the majority from participating and proved incapable of instituting reforms to bring about change. The last truly free election El Salvador had seen was in 1931 when Arturo Araju, a European educated engineer and lawyer was elected. By the standards of his time, he was a liberal. However, his time in office lasted only for a few months before he was tossed out by a coup in December 1931. A group of young military officers led by Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez ousted Arajo and Martinez assumed power. This coup marked the beginning of the era of generals and colonels shooting their way into the Presidential Palace.<sup>33</sup> This inability to enact and maintain political change historically combined with the obvious economic inequalities brought forth the beginnings of the revolution that would brew from before 1932 until the official outbreak of the war in 1980.

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<sup>30</sup> Byrne 1996, 20

<sup>31</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 51,

<sup>32</sup> Byrne 1996, 22,

<sup>33</sup> Bonner 1984, 33



In January 1932, following the military coup and fraudulent election, the Communist party, led by Farabundo Marti, called for an insurrection. They believed that the country was ready for a peasant rebellion fuelled by the popular discontent caused by the coup and the collapse of coffee prices. In 1931, the collapse of the world coffee market put the Salvadoran economy into crisis. The coffee oligarchy responded to this crisis, by further slashing the wages of the peasant workers.<sup>34</sup> Before, the insurrection could take place, major party leaders, including Farabundo Marti, were captured. Despite their capture, the insurrection went forward and the insurgents were able to take control of several towns in the west of the country. The rebels attacked government military forces with the support of the indigenous population or Pipil Indians. Armed with machetes, the rebels killed 100 people in the process of securing hold of the towns in the west.<sup>35</sup>

The army, however, had little trouble crushing the rebellion and General Martinez, the current military leader of the country, was determined to use this situation as an opportunity to prevent any other peasant rebellions. The rebellion was put down in three days and in the weeks that followed nearly 30,000 peasants were rounded up and executed. El Salvador's rich Indian language, dress, and culture were thought to be wiped out. Roadways and ditches were littered with bodies. Men were tied up, tortured, and executed thrown into mass graves they themselves had been forced to dig.<sup>36</sup> Subsequent military governments deliberately tried to erase the Matanza of 1932 from the

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<sup>34</sup> Murray 1997, 11

<sup>35</sup> Byrne 23, 1996

<sup>36</sup> Bonner 23, 1996

country's history. The National Library was even purged of all records, including newspaper articles detailing the revolt and subsequent massacre. Regardless of this effort, La Matanza is an event that the people of El Salvador, the peasantry especially, have never forgotten. It is the event that marks the start of the modern history that led up to the Civil War and has fueled the revolutionary fires ever since.

Therefore, it is clear that the roots of the Salvadoran Civil War run historically deep. The revolution was not caused simply due to the economic inequality or due the inability of the political system to enact reforms. The combination of the long history of economic, social, and political inequality acted as ingredients that would eventually erupt into the revolutionary flames.

### **Pre- Civil War Years**

In the years directly preceding the Civil War, specifically 1972 through 1980 violence and general unrest began to escalate. In the 1972 election, Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte ran against the militarily backed Arturo Armando Molina. This election was one of the most blatantly fraudulent elections in Salvadoran history. Napoleon Duarte was to be the first president in 40 years who was not hand picked by the landed oligarchy and the military. However, immediately following the announcement of his victory, a news blackout was imposed for three days, after which the Election Board announced new results. Colonel Arturo Molina was declared president and Duarte was forcibly taken from the Venezuela Embassy, beaten, and forced into exile in Venezuela.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Manwaring 18, 1995

This obvious fraud convinced many individuals, especially professionals and university students, that there was no opportunity for peaceful, democratic change in El Salvador. Duarte stated, “If democracy could not work, then people had to look for other solutions to their problems. When the armed forces threw me out of El Salvador, faith in the electoral process faded away. Many people concluded that the powers ruling El Salvador would never permit votes to defeat them. Change had to come by other means”.<sup>38</sup>

Following the election of 1972, violence in El Salvador continued to escalate. The guerillas kidnapped for ransom and revenge, while right wing death squads looked for revenge through the elimination of non-violent leaders, priests, and peasants. Military coups and fraudulent elections continued to take place. In 1977, General Carlos Humberto Romero was elected president in another blatantly fraudulent election. Police and ORDEN members, a paramilitary group of informers and enforcers, forcibly removed or arrested opposition party poll watchers.<sup>39</sup> Several ballot boxes were full before the voting even began and orders went out over two-way radios to stuff more ballot boxes wherever necessary. The candidates opposing Romero, Claramont and Morales, vowed to stay with protesters gathering in the Plaza Libertad to challenge this obvious fraud, however on February 28<sup>th</sup>, the military forces charged the crowd firing machine guns and killing over 100 innocent people.<sup>40</sup>

General Romero was not to stay in power for long, however. In 1979, strange things began to happen in the capital, and it was evident that a coup was taking place in

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<sup>38</sup> Duarte 91, 1986

<sup>39</sup> ORDEN or the Organización Democrática Nacionalista refers to rural paramilitary organizations established to police the countryside's.

<sup>40</sup> Duarte 95, 1986

San Salvador. The coup leaders themselves were unsure as to who would be in charge. The leaders first agreed to organize a ruling junta formed of five members, including members from the military and Christian Democrat Party. The Christian Democrat Vice Presidential candidate from the 1972 election, Guillermo Ungo, became a junta member. The other members included military officers Colonel Adolfo Majano and Colonel Jamie Abdul Gutierrez, as well as Roman Mayorga Quizor, the president of the Jesuit Central American University and a Phelps Dodge Factory manager, Mario Andino.<sup>41</sup> This civilian-military junta was at first a ray of light against the violent oppression El Salvador had been facing. The junta denounced the violence of ORDEN, the corruption of the government, and the abuse of human rights. However, despite these claims, a call for agrarian reform, respect for labor unions, and free elections, the junta eventually collapsed due to internal tension between the civilians and the military officers.

A second junta government was formed in December of 1979; however, following the murder of 5 Democratic Revolutionary Front or FDR leaders, all members of the junta aligned with the left or Christian Democrats resigned on January 3, 1980.<sup>42</sup> The following year, 1980, was a horrific year for El Salvador and saw the formal outbreak of war between the military and the FMLN. On January 22, the popular organizations on the left united and marched through the streets of the capital.<sup>43</sup> Thus,

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<sup>41</sup> Duarte 98, 1986

<sup>42</sup> Democratic Revolutionary Front or FDR was one wing of the revolutionary coalition. The murder of Enrique Alvarez and 4 other of the FDR leaders pushed the FDR to shift away from its more independent status and more actively join the guerilla organizations.

<sup>43</sup> Duarte 1986, 107

the flames of revolution that had been present since the 1932 Matanza had finally erupted into full-scale violence. The Guerra Civil had officially begun.

### **Key Players of the Civil War**

#### **FMLN**

The key players of the Civil War include the left or the FMLN, the right or the ARENA party and Military, the United States, and the Catholic Church. The FMLN or Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, named for Farabundo Marti the leader of the 1932 Rebellion, was a coalition of five revolutionary guerilla organizations. The FMLN was formed on October 10, 1980 and formed from the Fuerzas Populares de Comunistas Salvadoreño (FPL), Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), the Resistencia Nacional (RN), the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS), and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos or Workers Revolutionary Party (PRTC).<sup>44</sup> Despite, the ideological differences of the revolutionary groups, in 1980 they merged into one mass leftist organization under one flag.<sup>45</sup> The FMLN ideology rested in democratic change and fight against social inequality.

#### **ARENA**

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<sup>44</sup> The Fuerzas Populares de Liberación- Farabundo Marti (FPL) or the Popular Forces for Liberation was a radical wing of the Salvadoran Communist Party. The Ejercito Revolucionario Del Pueblo (ERP) or the People's Revolutionary Army was formed in 1971 by dissident Christian Democrats. The Fuerzas Populares Armadas de Resistencia Nacional (RN) or the Armed Forces of National Resistance formed in 1975 by a faction of the ERP. The Partido Comunista Salvadoreña (PCS) or Salvadoran Communist Party was founded in the 1930s. The Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC) or the Workers Revolutionary Party was influenced by Marxist ideology and formed in 1976 with the help of Dr. Fabio Castillo Figueroa, the former president of the University of El Salvador.

<sup>45</sup> Duarte 1986, 96

The ARENA party or Alianza Republicana Nacionalista was founded in response to the FMLN on September 30, 1981 by Roberto D' Aubussion.<sup>46</sup> The ARENA party, made up of military leaders as well as civilians, had historical control of the country, although simply known previous to 1981 as the government and military. ARENA is also simply referred to as the right or as the military during the Civil War, as the military and ARENA party were directly aligned.

In the late 1980s the Salvadoran military grew to 60,000 members, the majority of them poor, uneducated peasants. Many of the young recruits entered the army through forced recruitment. Following a program of physical and ideological abuse, the soldiers were often broken down completely and willing to do anything to defend their country against this communist threat. The military and ARENA parties utilized a scorched earth policy, which resulted in a number of massacres, such as El Mozote in Morazán in December of 1981, in which at least one thousand civilians were executed.<sup>47</sup> The ideology of the right historically and during the civil war was one of extreme conservatism, loyalty to the landed oligarchy, and anti- communism.<sup>48</sup>

### **The United States**

The third player in this conflict was the United States. Although, the United States is not a focus of this paper, leaving out the role the U.S played would be a grave mistake and act of disrespect to the Salvadoran people. The United States has had long standing

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<sup>46</sup> ARENA, Nationalist Republican Alliance

<sup>47</sup> Murray 14, 1997

<sup>48</sup> Duarte 97, 1986

involvement in the internal affairs of El Salvador. Previous to the Civil War, the United States exerted its influence on El Salvador through the coffee industry. As El Salvador's largest coffee consumer, the United States had significant veto power in the internal affairs of El Salvador. The involvement of the US increased in the 1960s with the Kennedy Alliance for Progress. This policy sought the prevention of another Cuba entertained two main strategies.

The first was encouraging political parties and fair elections along with a series of economic and social changes including a land reform and greater educational opportunities. The second strategy, which the Salvadoran military favored, was a counterinsurgency strategy to root out and destroy guerilla groups and their supporters. "During the 1980's the Salvadoran government received approximately 3.6 billion dollars from the US government."<sup>49</sup> This support for the Salvadoran government and the fact that the U.S government would play such a significant economic role in supporting any Latin American government was unprecedented in U.S history. In the mid 1980s "the U.S alone funded between 20 percent and 43 percent of the Salvadoran's budget".<sup>50</sup> By the end of the Civil War the US had given over \$8 billion to the Salvadoran government. The role of the U.S in the El Salvadoran Civil War is therefore, significant and must be addressed

### **Catholic Church**

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<sup>49</sup> Kampwirth 49, 2003

<sup>50</sup> Kampwirth 49, 2003

The role the Catholic Church played is also of crucial importance. The Catholic clergy played a key role in the transformation of peasant consciousness.<sup>51</sup> “No institution has had as much influence on politics in Latin America as the Catholic Church.”<sup>52</sup> The role of the Catholic Church dates back to the colonial period. Colonialism allowed Europeans to obtain access to labor and land and provided the Church with the opportunity to convert the indigenous people. This spiritual justification for colonialism mean that the Church hierarchy was slow to critique the mass murder and economic exploitation that was inherent in colonialism. In El Salvador, the Church traditionally promoted the idea that “the meek shall inherit the earth”. Thus, those that simply accepted the social inequalities in this world would receive their reward in the next. The Church did not minister to the needs of the poor, but catered to the desires of the wealthy.

In 1965, however, following the Vatican II Council and the Medellin Conference, the Church in Latin America began to change.<sup>53</sup> The Second Vatican Council met in four sessions from 1962 through 1965. From this Council came “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” which called the whole church to the tasks of “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel”. As a response to this Council, bishops began to meet around the world to discuss and examine the signs of the time. Therefore the bishops of Latin America gathered together in Medellin, Columbia in 1968 for two weeks. From this conference founding insights of

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<sup>51</sup> Byrne 27, 1984

<sup>52</sup> Gonzales 3, 2001

<sup>53</sup> Bonner 67, 1996



Liberation theology were formed<sup>54</sup>. The Catholic Church in Latin America shifted its perspective to address directly the issue of social justice. From the Vatican II Council and the Medellin Conference emerged the ideas of Liberation theology that so drastically impacted El Salvador.

Liberation theology finds its roots in scripture. It is a social movement “characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities, grass-roots churches, and the preferential option for the poor. This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities”.<sup>55</sup> Ignacio Ellacuria described liberation theology as “a reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling God’s Reign. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world”.<sup>56</sup> Ellacuria argues that liberation theology not only reflects the meaning of Christian faith, but also promotes action.<sup>57</sup>

Although priests and nuns encouraged young Salvadorans to join the revolutionary organizations, they did not directly advocate violence. Archbishop Oscar Romero argued that “Christians are not afraid of combat; they know how to fight, but they prefer the language of peace... However when a dictatorship seriously violates

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<sup>54</sup> Kevin F. Burke S.J., 2

<sup>55</sup> Burke 2

<sup>56</sup> Burke 3

<sup>57</sup> Ignacio Ellacuria was born in Spain in 1930. He served as the rector of the Jose Simeon Canas Central American University for over 10 years. He was a theologian and philosopher who was committed to the human right of the Salvadoran people. He openly critiqued the right and military of El Salvador. On November 16, 1989 Ellacuria among with 7 others was murdered on the University campus for standing up for human rights.

human rights and attacks the common good of the nation, when it becomes unbearable and closes all channels of dialogue, when this happens, the Church speaks of the legitimate right of insurrectional violence.”<sup>58</sup> It was due to these revolutionary thoughts and dedication to the poor that led to the murder of priests, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

During the first five months of 1977, five priests were tortured, eight expelled, and six denied reentry after leaving the country. There were continual threats against priests. Homes, radio stations, and the Jesuit run high school were all bombed. Pamphlets were even circulated in 1977 with the statement, “Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest!”<sup>59</sup> On March 12, 1977 Father Rutilio Grande was on his way to offer a Saturday evening mass in El Paisnal, the small farm village where he had been born. He was traveling with a teenage boy and a 72 year old peasant man when they were ambushed. All three died on the spot. In total before the outbreak of war, from 1964 through 1978, 15 bishops, priests, and nuns were murdered.<sup>60</sup> Father Grande and the other martyred Church people were the first, but they were certainly not the last murdered churchmen or women El Salvador would see.

On March 24, 1980 Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered. Romero had been a symbol of hope and inspiration for the Salvadoran people. When Romero first came to his post as Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 he was a good, holy priest, who was conservative and traditional. The right had applauded for the timid, conservative bishop who declined to denounce landowners who paid less than the minimum wage and

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<sup>58</sup> Bonner 69, 1996

<sup>59</sup> Bonner 66, 1996

<sup>60</sup> Bonner 73, 1996

criticized priests who had spoken out against the repression.<sup>61</sup> Many on the left were crushed when Rome named him Archbishop; however, he quickly transformed and was not the puppet the right had hoped him to be.<sup>62</sup>

As Archbishop, Romero began publishing the names of the disappeared, defending the mass organizations, and made pleas to stop the murdering of innocent people.<sup>63</sup> Romero defended those most exposed to repressive violence, the poor, urban workers, the widows, and children. He supported labor unions and farmers cooperatives. He also promoted the right of people to organize and address their basic needs. Critiques argue that Romero supported insurrectional violence; however, Romero was simply speaking out and supporting the people in their right for peace and justice. Romero stated “when there really is present a situation of permanent, structured injustice, then the situation itself is violent... The church is aware that anything said in that situation, even something undoubtedly prompted by love, will sound violent. But the church cannot refrain from speaking out.”<sup>64</sup>

As Romero’s relationship formed with the people of El Salvador they began to view him “as their own bishop, as a prophet, as a father.”<sup>65</sup> Romero’s sermons were the most widely listened to program in the entire country and his homily from March 23<sup>rd</sup>, the day before he was killed is now famous. He told soldiers that they were not bound by unjust orders to kill. “I ask you, I beg you, I order you... in the name of God, stop the

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<sup>61</sup> Rosenberg 248, 2007

<sup>62</sup> Quigley 1

<sup>63</sup> Rosenberg 248, 2007

<sup>64</sup> Archbishop Romero, Burke 6

<sup>65</sup> Vigil 97, 1990

repression.”<sup>66</sup> Yet, the repression continued and as he said mass in a small chapel of Divine Providence Hospital, a man pulled up at the doorway of the chapel and killed the archbishop with one shot. The archbishop who was so well known and loved bled out on the altar. However, the violence did not stop there. At Archbishop Romero’s funeral, the police opened fired on mourners and killed another 40 innocent people.<sup>67</sup>

As the year 1980 progressed, the Catholic Church only continued to see the martyrdom of more of its members. On December 4, 1980 the bodies of four American churchwomen were found in a shallow, unmarked grave not far from the San Salvador Airport. The four women, Sister Ita Ford, a Maryknoll nun, Sister Maura Clarke, also a Maryknoll nun, Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline nun, and Jean Donovan, a lay missionary were raped and murdered on December 2 by the National Guard. Jean and Dorothy had driven to the airport to meet Ita and Maura who were returning from a conference in Managua, Nicaragua. As they drove home from the airport, the National Guard stopped them at a roadblock. When they were found, it was obvious they had been raped and shot at close range. The U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, White stated, “We already knew they would be dead, but when you saw the flies, the ropes, when you saw them uncovered, it was horrible and pitiable... You see people you love beaten and broken, and you realize something important about El Salvador. They’ll kill anybody.”<sup>68</sup> The four women had been ministering to the poor of El Salvador and the Salvadoran right

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<sup>66</sup> Quigley 2

<sup>67</sup> Rosenberg 248, 1992

<sup>68</sup> LeoGrande 2000, 62

murdered them for it. The Churchwomen, sadly, were not the last to be murdered for such an act.

### **The Continuing Violence of the Civil War**

As demonstrated by the 70,00 left dead in El Salvador, it is clear that Church members were not the only ones affected by the violence. As mentioned, with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1980, the violence in the country only continued to escalate. This is illustrated by the above-mentioned atrocities, yet 1980 in El Salvador saw even more violence. Following the murder of Archbishop Romero on March 24<sup>th</sup>, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, soldiers stormed and closed the National University in San Salvador killing at least fifty young Salvadorans. Following this, on November 27<sup>th</sup>, five FDR leaders were seized from a Catholic High school tortured and killed.<sup>69</sup>

In 1981, The FMLN launched their Final Offensive. The offensive began on January 10, 1981 and was premature in timing. The guerilla forces were not well armed or well trained and were unable to achieve their task of gaining control over the Department of Morazán. The popular support they expected to obtain did not materialize and the armed forces continued to defend their positions and the offensive failed militarily.<sup>70</sup> The Salvadoran government and US officials were maintaining that the guerillas had been reduced to decentralized bands with limited military capacity. However, the November 1989 guerilla offensive demonstrated the foolishness of this

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<sup>69</sup> Bonner 1996, 67

<sup>70</sup> Bonner 1996, 38,

assertion.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the Civil War waged on. Another massacre occurred in 1982 at the Sumpul River. “There were so many vultures picking at the bodies that it looked like a black carpet”.<sup>72</sup> As the peasants attempted to flee from the violence, helicopters, the Salvadoran National Guard, and ORDEN fired upon them. “Women tortured before the finishing shot, infants thrown into the air for target practice, were some of the scenes of the criminal slaughter”.<sup>73</sup> More innocent lives were lost on January 31<sup>st</sup> 1982 when soldiers stormed the poor capital barrio of San Antonio Abad killing 20 innocent people.

Day after day in El Salvador, the horror of the war continued. However, in 1984, Duarte was elected president of El Salvador and talks between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN began in Mexico and Costa Rica. These talks failed to amount to anything substantial and violence between both sides continued. In 1989, Alfredo Cristiani of the ARENA party was elected president, and the talks between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN continued in Mexico and Costa Rica. Despite these talks, fighting between both sides continued. In November of 1989, the FMLN launched a coordinated military offensive attacking military centers in major cities and the Salvadoran army responded by bombing residential neighborhoods that they believed to support the FMLN.

On November 16, 1989 a devastating event for the Salvadoran left took place as six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter were shot and killed at the University of Central America. Ignacio Ellacuria, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Segundo Montes, Arnando

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<sup>71</sup> Murray 1997, 15

<sup>72</sup> Bonner 112, 1996

<sup>73</sup> Bonner 112, 1996

Lopez, Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, Juan Ramon Moreno, Julia Elba Ramos, and Celina Ramos were all murdered between 2 and 3 A. M by National Guard forces.<sup>74</sup> Witnesses reported seeing more than 20-armed men in uniforms enter the home of the Jesuits between 2 AM and 3 AM through the back door blown off by an explosive device.

Most of the victims had been shot in the head and four of the bodies had been left face down in the front yard of the house.<sup>75</sup> Pieces of brain, blood, and clothing were scattered around the yard. Several of their faces had been blown apart by the gunshots. Although a sign left near the bodies said, “The FMLN has executed the spies who turned on them. Victory or death. FMLN”, the FMLN linked the killings to a government-directed death squad and promised to avenge their deaths. Analysts also attributed the killings to the right. U.S Ambassador William Walker noted, “It is an act of barbarity that not only brought shame to El Salvador but will leave a gaping hole in this country’s intellectual and academic community”.<sup>76</sup> A rose garden and museum now stand in the place of the horrific scene that was found on the morning of November 16<sup>th</sup>. The six Jesuits, Elba and Celina have not been forgotten in the hearts of the Salvadoran people

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<sup>74</sup> Farah, 1989. Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, age 59, was the rector of the Central American University and a widely respected leftist intellectual. Fr. Segundo Montes, age 56, was a Spanish born sociology professor and Jesuit Priest who worked with Salvadoran refugees in the United States. Fr. Ignacio Martin-Baro, age 50, was a Spanish born Salvadoran citizen and widely known as an analyst of national affairs and the founder and director of the Public Opinion Institute. Fr. Armando Lopez, age 53, was a Spanish born philosophy professor. Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, age 71, was a Salvadoran born Jesuit priest who was the direction of the Center of Humanitarian Assistance affiliated with the University of Central America. Fr Juan Ramon Morena, age 56, was a Spanish born Jesuit priest and director of several university related programs. Julia Elba Ramos, age 42 a cook staying at the Central American University and her daughter, Cecilia Ramos, age 15, were murdered alongside the Jesuits.

<sup>75</sup> Farah 1989, 1-2,

<sup>76</sup> Farah 1989, 2,

and their murders continue to mark the incontestable horrors that took place during the Civil War.

### **The Peace Accords**

Finally, in 1990, a step towards peace and towards fulfilling the dreams of those who had been martyred striving to achieve this peace began to come true. With the aide of the United Nations, serious negotiations to end the civil war through political means began between the FMLN and ARENA. For various reasons, the US, the FMLN, the military, the war weary civilian population, and the economic elite came to the same conclusion that the stalemate would only end with a negotiated peace settlement.<sup>77</sup> The Civil War ended January 1992 with the signing of a negotiated peace accord. Both groups, the FMLN and ARENA, realized it would be futile to continue and thus decided to sign “an agreement not simply to stop shooting but also to restructure society”.<sup>78</sup>

The Chapultepec Accords were signed by the ARENA party and the FMLN in Mexico. Alfredo Cristiani, newly elected Salvadoran President, spoke about the roots of the War in a speech following the signing of the Accords. “This painful and tragic crisis has political, economic, social, and cultural roots that are both old and deep. In the past, one of the pernicious characteristics of our national way of life was the absence of the mechanisms necessary to permit the free play of ideas... the absence of a truly democratic way of life”.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Murray 1997, 15

<sup>78</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 80

<sup>79</sup> Murray 1997, 3



The key players involved in the Peace Accords include the FMLN, ARENA, and the United Nations. The UN had entered the Salvadoran peace process in early 1990. Under the leadership of Alvarado de Soto, the UN team quickly took the role as mediator in the talks. In July 1991, the UN launched ONUSAL, the United Nations Observers Mission to El Salvador, to supervise the implementation of the human rights agreement signed in 1990. ONUSAL had unprecedented access to information and government officials, an annual budget as much as \$32 million, and almost complete freedom of movement for its team of 1200 observers, ONUSAL had an incredible capacity to intervene in the implementation of the Peace Accords.<sup>80</sup>

By coming to the table of the 1992 Peace Accords, the FMLN agreed to not challenge the basic economic foundations of the country in exchange for the ARENA party's promise to reduce the power of the armed forces.<sup>81</sup> The accords mandated demilitarization, legalized the FMLN as a political party, mended the constitution, reformed the electoral and judicial systems, attempted to settle the land distribution issues, established independent commissions to identify those responsible for the major human rights abuses, and purged the army of the worst human rights violators.<sup>82</sup>

Specifically the Peace Accords focused on making systematic changes in the following areas: demilitarization, the Justice System, the Electoral System, and the Economic System. The size of the military was reduced in half and the worst of the human rights violators were purged from the Armed forces. The function of the army was

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<sup>80</sup> Murray 1997, 23,

<sup>81</sup> Bremond 1542, 2007

<sup>82</sup> Shayne 46, 2004

shifted and limited to only national defense. The Peace Accord also made significant changes to the Justice System. The accords created a new process for the election of Supreme Court Justices, amended the constitution to streamline the legal process for those accused of breaking laws, and created the Office of Human Rights to monitor respect for human rights throughout society.

The Electoral System was also affected by the Peace Accords. The accords made note of the need to redesign the entire electoral system focusing on improving voter registration, the actual voting process, campaigning, vote-counting in order to make the system more accessible and democratic. The Accords also mandated the recognition of the FMLN as a legitimate political party. The final focus of the Peace Accords addressed issues within the Economic System. The government committed to carrying out a National Reconstruction Plan to integrate ex-combatants on both sides in the economy, to repair the social infrastructure destroyed by the war, and created the Socioeconomic Forum to promote the discussion of economic problems among all sectors of society.<sup>83</sup> The Peace Accords, however, did not solve all of the countries problems.<sup>84</sup> They did not address the unjust distribution of wealth in the country, the problems of structural poverty, the environmental degradation, or the inequalities between men and women.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Murray 22, 1997

<sup>84</sup> For more information of the Peace Accords see Jack Spence, et al., *A Negotiated Revolution? A Two-Year Progress Report on the Salvadoran Peace Accords*. Cambridge, MA: Hemisphere Initiative, 1994.

<sup>85</sup> Kampwirth 80, 2004

## **Conclusion**

Between 1980 and 1992 over 70,000 people were killed in El Salvador. Seventy thousand lives were lost in this bloody conflict-a conflict that had been brewing throughout Salvadoran history since before the 1930s due to economic, political, and social inequalities. When considering such a conflict, it is difficult, to move past the most obvious acts of horror, the largest massacres, the murder of Archbishop Romero, of the four Churchwomen, of the six Jesuits, of Elba and Celina as they most clearly demonstrate the horror of the war. The fact remains, however, that 70,000 people were murdered. Thus, the next question arises: how many of these 70,000 people murdered were Salvadoran women? What role did Salvadoran women have in this bloody conflict and how did this war contribute to the rise of a feminist consciousness? How does their role illuminate the situation of women in El Salvador today? The role of women during the Civil War must now be addressed.

## Chapter 2: The Role of Women in the Civil War

### **Introduction**

The first chapter addressed the important historical factors leading to the eruption of the bloody Civil War in El Salvador and the critical events that took place during the span of the conflict. It provided the historical background necessary for the further exploration that takes place in this chapter. The first part of this chapter focuses on the issue that is at the heart of this thesis: the role of women. It examines how civilian women, women not directly affiliated with the FMLN or popular organizations, were impacted by the war, physically, economically, and socially and discusses the reasons that led women to join the revolutionary movement. The second part of this chapter then makes the important distinction that women were not simply impacted by the war, but were active participants and eventually their participation transformed into organizing for gendered reasons. The way in which the Civil War impacted women, the decision of many women to join the revolutionary movement, the active participation of women in the conflict, and the transformation of consciousness that took place is crucial to understanding the eventual development of women's organizations and the work women are doing in El Salvador today.

### **Part 1: Impacts of the Civil War**

The impact of the Civil War on women was tremendous and long lasting. However, women in different groups of society were affected in varying ways. The

impact on civilian women, on women forced to relocate to refugee camps, and women on the right side of the political spectrum are examined here. The extent of the impact of the war can be seen in three sectors of life: physical and psychological affects, economic affects, and political affects.

### **Civilian Women**

For civilian women, or women unaffiliated with either the FMLN or ARENA parties the impact of the Civil War was especially great.<sup>86</sup> Violence, sexual abuse or physical insecurity prevented them from moving about freely. Women were literally trapped in their homes in fear of violence from either the military or in some cases the FMLN. When women did venture outside of their homes, it was usually due to escalating violence or their homes being invaded. Once outside the home and often inside as well, physical and sexual abuse was the norm. Women were regularly beaten, raped, and even murdered as casualties of war. The sexual abuse, starvation, and extreme violence were severe especially at the hands of the military, as “soldiers in belligerent groups violated women as a tactic of warfare”.<sup>87</sup> Sister Margarita Navarro, a representative of the Human Rights Commission for El Salvador, stated that “a woman in the hands of the death squads is always raped, and this applies for women of all ages.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> FMLN: Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, ARENA: Nationalist Republican Alliance

<sup>87</sup> Kumar 2001, 11

<sup>88</sup> Sister Margarita Navarro, representative of the Human Rights Commission for El Salvador, *Women in Resistance Movements*, pages 5-22

Furthermore, there was also an increase in domestic violence by men against women and by women against children during the conflict.<sup>89</sup> Although domestic violence, especially, and child abuse have been traditionally acceptable forms of discipline in El Salvador, the increase of pressures and tensions during the Civil War led to an increase in this violence not only in the number of cases of abuse, but also in the severity of the abuse. As violence escalated and became the norm in everyday life, the intrafamilial violence escalated as well. The psychological trauma on women stemming from these violent acts, as well the trauma from watching their children, their husbands and other members of their families suffer and die was tremendous.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the fear of violence, both sexual and physical, and the psychological trauma was constant for women during the civil war and marked them not only physically, but psychologically as well.

The fear of violence also directly impacted the economic situation for the civilian women. Violence and fear of violence restricted their social and economic activities especially for women who worked into the evenings. For example, selling tortillas or pupusas on the street in the evening was simply not feasible, nor was walking home past dark from the maquilas. This inability to participate in the economy in these ways was especially detrimental to women leading many families down the path towards starvation and destitution. The economic impact of the war can also be seen in the familiar roles women played during the conflict. During the war there was an increase in household burdens for women. Women assumed men's roles such as disciplining children,

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<sup>89</sup> Kumar 2001, 15

<sup>90</sup> Sister Margarita Navarro, representative of the Human Rights Commission for El Salvador, *Women in Resistance Movements*, pages 5-22

repairing homes, and most importantly assuming all economic responsibility. As a portion of the male population left to fight in the war this left women to lead households and search for other forms of employment.<sup>91</sup> Therefore the lack of free mobility due to violence and the increase in number of female-headed households during the Civil War combined to create an economically dire situation for women.

As the reduction of the male population impacted women economically, it also had a large impact politically. Due to the reduced presence of men, women's public roles and responsibilities expanded during the conflict. Women became active at the community level, founded organizations to press for the release of political prisoners, took control of local political institutions, and entered the public arena to support the war efforts.<sup>92</sup> This can specifically be seen through the example of the grass root communities and the Catholic Church. As previously mentioned, Vatican II and the Medellin shifted the perspective of the Latin American Church from the traditional alliance with the landed oligarchy to a focus on social justice and the preferential option for the poor. This shift also impacted the way women were treated by the Church. Following Vatican II priests made it very clear that women had just as much value as men, and had exactly the same rights. They would urge the men not to leave their wives and children at home when they attended mass, but to take them with them. For the priests, the most important thing was that everyone participated.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Kumar 2001, 15

<sup>92</sup> Kumar 2001, 21-23

<sup>93</sup> Vigil 1990, 55

The combined impact of this shift in perspective for the Catholic Church and the reduced male presence granted women the opportunity to involve themselves in the grassroots communities and the politics of their towns. During the conflict as well as following the end of the war, women represented the numerical majority in neighborhood churches. Thus, the Catholic Church began to look to women for pastoral needs. Many women found their neighborhood churches as a convenient and safe place to try out new leadership skills and the Salvadoran Church witnessed the growing importance of women in positions of authority.<sup>94</sup> The Church, therefore, supported many women in the development of leadership skills, which they later utilized in their involvement in politics as well as the feminist organizations.

### **Women in Refugee Camps**

Women forced to migrate to refugee camps were also seriously impacted by the war. “Hundred of thousands were driven from their homes, lost multiple family members, and suffered rape, abuse torture, and imprisonment at the hands of security forces”<sup>95</sup>. The movement to the refugee camps was an impact of the conflict in of itself; however, women living in these refugee camps were also impacted physically, psychologically, economically, and politically.

In the 1980s the largest areas of the countryside were simply emptied of civilians. Twenty thousand Salvadorans fled the violence of the countryside and went to

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<sup>94</sup> Taylder 2002, 46

<sup>95</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 185



Honduras.<sup>96</sup> The FMLN fighters often times brought their families to the Honduran border to ensure their safety. Within the refugee camps themselves, women outnumbered men. There were three main refugee camps: Colomoncagua, Mesa Grande, and San Antonio.

In the camps, there was little freedom of movement, little land for agriculture, and a fear of the Honduran soldiers that policed the camps. Although many women had escaped the violence of the Civil War, women still faced physical and sexual abuse from the Honduran soldiers as well as other Salvadoran men in the refugee camps. The violence and psychological trauma of the civil war followed the women to the refugee camps. Likewise, the economic situation women faced in the refugee camps was not a significant improvement from before they entered the camps. Although the presence of international non-governmental and humanitarian organizations and solidarity groups in the camps won the trust of some of the population and assisted with food and medical needs, many of these camps faced overcrowding and the continuation of malnutrition and illness.

Despite this, women were able to gain skills through their involvement in collective work and camp organization and were encouraged to participate in the political sphere. As they constituted the majority in the camps, women often became involved in the politics of the camp and exerted leadership in this manner. They also had access to family planning, education, and collective work.<sup>97</sup> As the repatriation of the refugees began in 1989, as a part of the war effort, the political impact on women continued. The

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<sup>96</sup> Fagen, Yudelman in Kumar 2001, 79

<sup>97</sup> Fagen, Yudelman in Kumar 2001, 80

FMLN believed that their negotiating position would be greater if the refugees repopulated the conflict zones.<sup>98</sup> As the refugees returned to the conflicts zones they were encouraged to be politically active in the repopulated zones as well. Therefore, despite the dangerous physical situation and dire economic situation in the refugee camps, these camps provided another arena for women to test and develop their organizational and political skills. Despite these positive changes in consciousness, it is evident that the physical, sexual, and psychological violence left lasting scars on women.

### **Women on the Right**

Women on the right were also greatly impacted during the war, although obviously with less severity.<sup>99</sup> Those women in high-income brackets had to live with the fear of being kidnapped by the guerillas. Their movement and mobility was greatly restricted as was the mobility of their family members.<sup>100</sup> Thus, they too suffered physical and psychological insecurity. Their movement and mobility was greatly restricted as was the mobility of their family members.<sup>101</sup> However, the war did not have the same economic or political impact on these women. They feared violence, as violence is a consequence of war, but their livelihoods and political roles were not drastically impacted during the conflict.

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<sup>98</sup> Fagen, Yudelma in Kumar 2001, 83

<sup>99</sup> Women on the right refers to women on the right side of the political spectrum aligning with ARENA party policies

<sup>100</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 185

<sup>101</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 185

Therefore, women, in general, were greatly impacted by the Civil War. Civilian women and women living in refugee camps were forced to live each day in fear of sexual and physical violence. Women involved on the political right also lived in fear of such violence, however, to a lesser degree. The economic situation for civilians and women living in the refugee camps was desperate and malnutrition and starvation were common. With the atrocious negative impacts of this conflict on women it is easy to overlook any positive impact the conflict could have had. However, civilian women and women in the refugee camps were both positively impacted politically. Women saw an increase in their roles and power in the social and political spectrum of daily life.

The distinction must be made, however, that women were not simply impacted by the war. Women also took active roles and participated within the conflict. The role of women in the revolutionary period can be seen in two areas: in their participation in the popular movements and in their participation as combatants for the FMLN.

### **Why Join the Revolution?**

The question that must first be raised is why women joined the revolutionary activities to begin with? What factors would lead a woman to join the FMLN? Factors included the severity of the physical and economic oppression, the desire to create a better world for their families, the migration to the cities, age, family networks, and participation in student activities.

The first of the factors was the severity of the situation all people faced during this time period. The gravity of the situation was discussed in the analysis of the Civil

War itself. However, the particular situation of women facing violence each day, losing numerous family member to the war, suffering economic distress all combined to form a basis for the imperative to join the revolutionary movement. As Sister Margarita Navarro stated, “the women have also seen their children, their husbands and other members of their families suffer and they have to decide to enter into to the struggle. There is no discrimination about who is more forceful in this revolution; the women have taken up arms and they play a very important role”<sup>102</sup>.

The second general factor that influenced women in their decision to join the revolutionary activities was the desire to create a better world for their families. Few women joined the revolutionary forces for the desire for gender justice; the vast majority joined to create a freer country and have more options in life. <sup>103</sup>They wanted “to end dictatorship, to end the exploitation of the poor and the indigenous, to create more just countries for their children”.<sup>104</sup> They knew that if they did not fight, they would too be killed. “We talk of human rights, but I think human rights must only be for the American people, because here there are no human rights. We know that we will be killed so we’ve all become revolutionaries. We have nothing to lose; we will fight”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, women joined revolutionary activities because they had no other options. The oppression and

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<sup>102</sup> Sister Margarita Navarro, Vazquez 1981,10

<sup>103</sup> Gender justice is used here to refer to the actions that directly challenge the gender inequalities. To fight with gender justice in mind would have signified that the women in El Salvador were fighting for their own interests, their own needs and for themselves. During the Civil War, however, women did the opposite of this. Rather than think primarily of their needs as women they instead for their families to create a more democratic world filled with less oppression and suffering.

<sup>104</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 6

<sup>105</sup> Sister Margarita Navarro, Vasquez, 1981,10

violence they suffered each day mandated action, action taken for their children, for their friends, but not for themselves.

With the particularly violent nature of society in El Salvador as well as the desire to create a better world for their families, women also joined the revolutionary struggle as a consequence to migration to the cities. During the Civil War women faced increased abandonment of wives due to the war effort. As illustrated above, the wives that were left behind were more economically desperate and in dire need of supporting themselves and their families. As a result of the increased abandonment, a greater number of women migrated to the cities to look for employment. Living in the cities facilitated social organizing. As the population of the cities increased, women were able to form new social connection that they did not have access to living in the countryside and were also exposed to the actions of more political groups. This increased their political awareness as well as their connection to the revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, the retention of family ties in the countryside provided these women with a direction connection to the guerilla forces.

Therefore, the severity of the oppression, the desire to end this oppression, and the increased migration to the cities are all general factors that influenced women in their decision to join the revolutionary struggles. Another important factor that impacted women joining the revolution was age. Joining the revolutionary coalition was also a way for many of them to create opportunities in an immediate sense, for the guerillas allowed many of them to escape the tedium of their homes, to joining another sort of family, to start life anew. However it was not simply young women who joined the revolutionary

struggle. As many young women joined to create a new life for themselves, many older women joined to create a better life for their families.

Family networks, which are highly particular to the familiar nature of women, were also important to the decision of many women to join the revolutionary struggle. Being raised in a family with a tradition of resistance made a woman more likely to join the revolutionary movement as family played a critical role in shaping a child's political values, sense of fairness, justice, and responsibility<sup>106</sup>. "Sometimes whole families joined the guerillas, especially in the rural areas, where the government's violence was less selective than the urban areas".<sup>107</sup>

The final factor that contributed to a women's choice to join the revolution is participation in student organizations. The participation in student and social organizations led to a gradual joining into revolutionary movements as "membership in one preexisting network gradually led her to participate in ever more radical groups". Many of the organizations women joined were not particularly radical or feminist early on. Organizations include popular cooperatives, soup kitchens, childcare centers, clinics, literacy programs, however, "severe repression in response to very moderate oppositional activities caused many women to support or join the guerillas as a means of self defense".<sup>108</sup> Therefore, for many women joining the revolutionary movement was an act of self-defense. Women did not join to promote women's issues, they joined create a society where their families could have enough to eat, where they did not have to live in

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<sup>106</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 11

<sup>107</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 62

<sup>108</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 8

constant fear, and where their children could grow up to have a better life than they did. This decision was influenced by the violence they faced every day, by the violence that their families faced, by their need for more economic security and migration to the city, by their age, family networks, and finally by their participation in student organizations.

Therefore, although women were dramatically impacted by the Civil War physically, psychologically, economically, and politically, this impact also led many of these women to enter into the conflict. The second part of this chapter explores this active participation of women in the conflict, an important shift in consciousness that took place among women, and the ways in which women participating in the conflict were treated by the military and FMLN. An examination of these factors all contributes the development and work of the feminist organizations acting in El Salvador today.

## **Part 2: Active Participation**

### **Participation of Women in the FMLN**

The evidence that women served as combatants in the FMLN debunks any theory that women were not active participants in the Civil War. Approximately 40% of the FMLN membership, 30% of the combatants, and 20% of the military leadership were women<sup>109</sup>. During the war women worked non-stop preparing huge amounts of food, sending and receiving thousands of messages, looking after the wounded and risking their lives for the FMLN. To further illustrate the active role women had in the Civil War it is

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<sup>109</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 2

important to illustrate several key women involved in the FMLN. Lorena Pena Mendoza or Rebecca Palacios, is one example of a high ranking female participant in the armed struggle. Mendoza has a history of over 30 years of participation with the FMLN. She was a part of the urban underground movement, served on the political- diplomatic commission as former deputy to the Legislative Assembly and served as a representative to the Central American Parliament.<sup>110</sup> She is also a cofounder and board member of a women's organization, MAM, Melina Ana Montes. Her participation, along with the participation of other women, illustrates that women did play a significant active role in the higher-ranking positions in the FMLN.

Ana Guadalupe Martinez is another important example of a woman in among the top leadership in the revolutionary movement. Martinez is one of many student activists who became a guerilla. She was born in 1952 on her grandparent's farm as the second child and first daughter of a family with 4 children. She was hardly a political activist at first and attended University with the intention of studying medicine. However after four years of study, she realized that the best way she could live her life was to break from her sheltered life and join the underground struggle. Her political awareness began in school when she witnessed a teacher strike in Santa Ana in 1967. " For me, the strike was a discovery. First of all I did not know that strikes existed and that a strike was when people did not go to work. And secondly, the motivation that brought on the

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<sup>110</sup> Shayne 2004, 41-42



strike...demands for better salaries and for a social security plan for teachers. That was when I really discovered the other part of the world that I had not known”<sup>111</sup>.

Martinez, thus, continued on her path towards activism and in 1980 became the second in command of the second largest of the organization that made up the FMLN, the ERP. In the 1990s she was elected to the Legislative Assembly. Important to her involvement and role in the revolution was an experience had in her early activism day with the military. When Martinez was 24 years old, the National Guard seized her due to of her revolutionary activities affiliated with the guerillas. She was shackled hand and food, blindfolded, and tossed naked on the floor while electric shocks were administrated through five electrodes attached to both sides of her hips, her left hand, her vulva, and the lumbar region of her spinal column. She was also brutally raped by a sergeant. Before this experience she was a medical student at the university, but because of this experience she was transformed into a guerilla commander<sup>112</sup>. Therefore, with the number of active combatants which was accessed following the signing of the Peace Accords and the examples of Lorena Pena Mendoza and Ana Guadalupe Martinez it is evident that women were active participants in the Civil War as armed combatants. However, the contribution of women does not lie simply the participation of armed combatants, but also in the involvement of women in the popular organizations.

### **Participation in the Popular Organizations**

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<sup>111</sup>Kampwirth 2003, 66, Interview, July 29, 1996

<sup>112</sup>Bonner 1984, 105

One way in which women participated actively in the revolution was through their involvement in popular organizations or women's organizations. The significance of this surpasses simply demonstrating that women were active agents. The role of women in the popular organizations demonstrates this, but more importantly demonstrates the crucial transition of the female participation in these movements from a focus on the war and support their compañeros to a focus placed on themselves and their issues as women.

### **Historical look into Women in Popular Organizations**

Women's organizing can be traced to the 1932 strike and Matanza. In 1947, the formation of the *La Liga Femenina*<sup>113</sup> focused on improving conditions for women in prison, establishing orphanages, and advocating women's right to vote, which was recognized in 1950. The 1960s and 1970s saw the increase of women in the popular organizations, namely in the trade union struggles. These were struggles to obtain a sense of economic security. Women working in the maquilas in the free trade zones had no protection from low unjust wages, dangerous working conditions, sexual harassment, and job insecurity. The development of these free trade zones was supposed to help El Salvador develop. However, the lack of governmental restrictions on the free trade zones, actually forced the women into a fixed state of poverty. Thus, women took to the streets and became involved in the trade unions. Women participated in organized strikes for improved living and working conditions. This was a battle for their basic need of

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<sup>113</sup> Women's League

economic stability, a battle to support their families<sup>114</sup>. Thus, women's organizations established prior to the Civil War were associated primarily with the labor struggle and for securing basic needs of women<sup>115</sup>.

The *Asociación de Mujeres Progresistas de El Salvador* or AMPES was the first women's organization to grow out of the opposition movement in the 1970's.<sup>116</sup> This organization was closely associated with the Communist Party. The *Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas* or AMES.<sup>117</sup> AMES was formed several years later as "a channel for the incorporation of those sectors of women who, on account of their specific conditions have not yet incorporated into the popular struggle"<sup>118</sup>. AMES emphasized women's disadvantaged economic conditions over collective gender identity. Both of these organizations were forced underground by government repression in the early 1980s and forced to operate in exile. Therefore, the roots of popular organizing can be seen prior to the Civil War with an emphasis placed on economic and basic rights. This same trend can be seen in the early conflict women's organizations that began to form in 1980. Both the pre- civil war popular organizations and the early conflict popular organizations focused their actions on fighting for the basic needs of society.

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<sup>114</sup> Women in National Liberation Movements: Latin America, 11

<sup>115</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001,185

<sup>116</sup> Association of Progressive Women in El Salvador

<sup>117</sup> Association of Salvadoran Women

<sup>118</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001,186, Thompson, Women of El Salvador, 95

### **Participation in Early Conflict Women's Organizations**

As mentioned, the participation of women in popular movements continued to be seen from 1980-1985 with the participation of women early conflict Women's Organizations. The early conflict women's organizations, popular organizations specifically acting between 1980 and 1985, were characterized by their attachment to popular grass roots organizations and their logistical support of these groups<sup>119</sup>. Early conflict organizations mobilized women around economic issues, survival during the war, and human rights. These organizations are characterized by few willing to embrace the concept of feminism. By 1989, nine different women's organizations had been formed in El Salvador. "As women's involvement increased in the workplace, neighborhoods, and rural communities, popular organizations were forced to redefine their organizing strategies to attract and retain female recruits".<sup>120</sup>

### **Participation in Late Conflict Women's Organizations**

The role of women in the popular movement during the Civil War can also be seen in their involvement in late conflict women's organizations. Late Conflict Women's Organizations were characterized by women challenging gender relations within grassroots organizations, as well as with in independent organizations. They were also characterized by a gendered discourse on women's rights from violence against women to inequalities in labor force and an increase number of member willing to embrace

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<sup>119</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 183

<sup>120</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 186

feminist ideas.<sup>121</sup> In these late conflict women's organizations there was a shift from supporting ongoing organizations to focusing specifically on women's issues and rights. This distinction is crucial for the understanding of women working in El Salvador today and the feminist organizations creation of a new organic national narrative.

### **Co-Madres and A Shift in Consciousness**

This shift in organizations from addressing basic needs to dealing with a gender perspective was a fundamental step for women's organizations that took place in the mid to late 1980s. One of the founders from Las DIGNAS, Morena Herrera, describes the transition best. "We see this as helping women to wake up, to support the process of women, to motivate them, to raise consciousness about the subordination of women". Although the process of consciousness raising was not fully implemented until following the Civil War, the roots of this shift in consciousness can be seen as early as 1986. Herrera demonstrates that "once the process is initiated, the idea that things can change, it can't be stopped. This process is faster for some women, slower for others, but whatever the rhythm, once it starts it can't be stopped". This shift for many women is very difficult because "it implies a process fundamentally very personal", but the women grew to see life differently. "Relationships with our families and our communities or within any space where women work, change. Some relationships have become more difficult as we

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<sup>121</sup> Cosgrove in Kumar 2001, 183

begin to identify and be more critical about subordination”. This shift in consciousness can be seen through the example of Co- Madres<sup>122</sup>.

Co-Madres was created to protest the continual violation of human rights. Co-Madres began as a small group of mothers searching for their disappeared relatives and imprisoned and assassinated family members. Armed with the lists of missing relatives they demanded to know who was in jails, forced the excavation of clandestine cemeteries, and publicized the government’s repressive actions. Their first actions took place in 1978 with the take over of a Salvadoran Red Cross Building. They then organized hunger strikes, a peaceful take over of the UN building in San Salvador, and takeover’s at Catholic Churches<sup>123</sup>. Despite repressive actions of the government, women marched in the streets, blocked off traffic with ropes, chanted slogans, and handed out leaflets. On Mother’s Day in 1986, Co-Madres took the streets protesting the hypocrisy of celebrating Mother’s Day in a country that bombs, tortures, and murders women and children. These women were fighting for their husbands, their sons, for those who had been disappeared, but they were not fighting for themselves. However, through their actions they were directly challenging the traditional passive role of women and in the process of seeking the freedom of their family members, they came to affirm and project their own dignity and liberation as women. Although the formal agenda of Co-Madres remained focused on confronting the human rights abuses in El Salvador, the women themselves began to seriously question female gender roles. Private conversation

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<sup>122</sup> Co-Madres, The Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared, and assassinated of El Salvador, *Birth of a Feminist Consciousness*, Off Our Backs

<sup>123</sup> Tula 1994, 3

about what rights they had as women eventually became part of their public agenda at the end of the 1980s.

### **Maria Teresa Tula, an Example of the Shift in Consciousness**

Maria Teresa Tula, who was a working class housewife before the conflict, but became an internationally known human rights organizer, is a strong example of the transformation that took place among women in the mid to late 1980s. At first Maria acted as a responsible housewife trying to protect her detained husband. However she became increasingly motivated by her own sense of justice to confront the military, government officials, and her own tortures in the battle for human rights. “In the process, she is awakened to her own oppression as a poor Salvadoran woman and begins to see the world through gendered eyes”<sup>124</sup>.

Throughout Maria’s childhood she suffered as many Salvadoran girls do. She was raised by her grandmother after her father left her and her mother went to work in the city. After her grandmother died, she moved in with her mother, her stepfather, and stepsiblings. She faced the gender violence that all Salvadoran girls face and did not know that she did not deserve to be treated this way. After getting pregnant and the father abandoning her at the age of 15 her “brother would beat me, and I could not say anything because in their eyes I was an undesirable woman. I had a daughter; I was not married;

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<sup>124</sup> Tula 1994, 1

and the baby's father had left me. This was a disgrace to them. Also because I didn't make enough money to support my daughter and myself.”<sup>125</sup>

She simply had to accept the abuse and violence because she was an undesirable woman. She also faced other men coming to her and telling her, “You are going to be my woman. Now that I have said that you are going to be my lover I can caress you and touch you where I want to.”<sup>126</sup>. As a woman, Maria was taught that she was the private property of any man that wished to be her lover. However, after the detainment of her husband she became involved with Co-Madres and her consciousness began to change.

This process took time and did not happen over night. Maria became involved with Co- Madres after meeting women from the organization in the jail visiting her husband who was detained as a “terrorist” for his actions in a sugar mill strike. As Maria became involved with Co-Madres, her work with the organization helped to bring about the freeing of her husband. However, despite all of the work she was doing to free her husband from jail, once her returned home he no longer approved of her activities with Co- Madres. Maria had been involved in the take over of the UN building where the mothers demanded that the UN official send the list of their disappeared to their office in Geneva and demand they do something about it. She had also taken part in the occupation of the Catholic Churches.

After the take over of the UN building “we began to occupy Catholic Churches. This is how we started getting our message out to the Salvadoran people.”<sup>127</sup> One of her

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<sup>125</sup> Tula 1994, 23

<sup>126</sup> Tula 1994, 28

<sup>127</sup> Tula 1994, 59



and the organization's biggest actions was the take over of the Salvadoran Red Cross Building. "We demanded the release of the 22 union workers from the sugar mill... we are simply going to occupy the building and hold a hunger strike."<sup>128</sup> Soon after Co-Madres started the hunger strike "political prisoners around the country started a hunger strike as well in solidarity with us. They put forward their demands for unconditional freedom and general amnesty for all political prisoners."<sup>129</sup>

However, despite all of this work done for others and for her husband, her husband at first did not approve of her activities. Maria explained her confusion, "My compañero was a working-class man who was very class-conscious. He had a lot of political experience- more than I did. He was always working to change the situation of workers who had been exploited by people in power. It seemed strange to me that a man who I thought had more political consciousness than I did would be telling me not to get involved in anything. He wanted me to stay home and take care of the house and the children. I couldn't really understand why he was saying this to me".<sup>130</sup>

This situation was common to many women who decided to work in the popular organizations and the women at Co-Madres talked to Maria about her situation. They asked her, "Are you such a fool that you are going to let your old man push you around? Women have the right to do what they want, not just what their husbands tell them to do. You don't need his permission for everything you do"<sup>131</sup>. Maria eventually came to affirm this position, but not before the tension between her and her husband had

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<sup>128</sup> Tula 1994, 60

<sup>129</sup> Tula 1994, 61

<sup>130</sup> Tula 1994, 69

<sup>131</sup> Tula 1994, 70

escalated. After returning home after several days of organizing, Maria came home to find the children unwashed, unfed, and her husband drunk. He told her, “I am in charge. I’m going to do what I feel like doing for once, not what you want”. However, Maria’s resolve was strong. “That’s what you think...but I have the same rights as you because I also bring in money for food and I take care of our children. You are not the only one”<sup>132</sup>. The tension then escalated to violence and he started to beat her. But once again, Maria’s had grown strong in her beliefs about equality. “You want a war, than I am going to give you war. You asshole, no one beats me. If you want us to kill each other then we will, but you are not going to lay another hand on me.. You are not going to beat me anymore”<sup>133</sup>.

Maria and her husband were eventually able to work out their differences after Maria continued to assert her equality and rights as a woman. Her husband allowed her to continue with her activities with Co- Madres and his eventual murder at the hands of the military was a devastating blow for Maria. Maria, in her work with Co-Madres and the shift in consciousness she experienced in her personal life are a testament to the transition of consciousness that took place in the late 1980s. Through Maria’s work with Co-Madres she began to eventually see and assert her value and rights as a woman. Thus, Co- Madres and Maria are strong examples of this shift in consciousness. The women began organizing for interests other than their own, however, through their participation they began to see their issues and themselves as important and worth fighting for<sup>134</sup>. Therefore, in the mid to late 1980s a crucial shift in the perspective of women in the

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<sup>132</sup> Tula 1994, 71

<sup>133</sup> Tula 1994, 74

<sup>134</sup> *Salvadoran Mothers Take Action, Off Our Backs*

popular organization occurred. No longer were women simply fighting for their basic needs and for their family, but they came to see their own dignity and value and began to fight for their own interests.

Therefore, women participated actively as both active combatants fighting the war and as organizers and supporters of the popular organizations. Ana Guadalupe Martinez was not only a strong example of female participation in the armed struggle. Her life and experience also demonstrate the way in which women participating in the armed struggle were treated by the military. The way in which women involved in the revolutionary struggle were treated by the military as well as the FMLN is crucial to the understanding of the development of the feminist organizations and the issues that they work for today. The way they were treated due directly impacts the actions they took following the conclusion of the Civil War and the programs they are implementing in El Salvador today.

## **Treatment of Women involved in the Revolutionary Struggle**

### **Treatment of Women by the Military**

Through their participation in the armed struggle or in popular movements, women captured by the armed forces faced a different and more damaging treatment than men. The military would take women involved in the FMLN or who simply had family members affiliated with the FMLN and torture them. “When state security or the death squad realized that an individual was involved in revolutionary activities, they sometimes

tortured or killed some of that person's relatives as a form of revenge"<sup>135</sup>. In an interview with Kampwirth one woman working in a police station observed a young girl "that they had tied up and blindfolded and they had abused her in the room where they tortured people... It hurt me so much to see her at that moment: raped, beaten up, tied up, blindfolded, and hungry"<sup>136</sup>. Both men and women were tortured in prison, however "in addition the women were tortured in a different way, rape, degrading your body, that sort of thing did not happen to men"<sup>137</sup>. COPES was a political organization created to record the testimonies of prison abuses and work towards preventing further abuses. Through this organization, cases of raped women, women who became pregnant due to the rapes, and cases of torture were recorded to illustrate the devastation women faced at the hands of the military.

Maria Teresa Tula tells the story of Silvia Olan, the secretary of *Sindicato de la Luz Eléctrica de Sonsonate*<sup>138</sup>. Silvia was captured and murdered by the armed forces. "There was evidence that she had been raped before she died. They had cut off part of her genitals and stuffed them into her nose. They cut off her breasts and fingers as well. They had burned her eyes with acid, pulled out her tongue, and strangled her"<sup>139</sup>. Another friend of Maria faced a similar fate. Delmi, a member of Co- Madres whose mother was also a member, was captured by the armed forces at Planes de Renderos, a park in San Salvador, with her boyfriend and several of her friends. "They killed them and dumped

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<sup>135</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 62

<sup>136</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 64, Interview, June 24, 1996

<sup>137</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 80, Interview, June 27, 1996

<sup>138</sup> The Electrical Workers Union of Sonsonate

<sup>139</sup> Tula 1994, 80

their bodies in a place called Panchimalco that is near the Planes de Renderos. They raped Delmi. They tortured her by pulling out her tongue and her fingernails. After she was dead they cut off her head. She had a lot of wounds on her body where she was cut”,<sup>140</sup>.

Maria, herself, was captured and tortured. A man came up behind her at a bus station and told her to “keep walking and don’t make any noise. We are going to make you talk. If you don’t talk we’ll kill you”<sup>141</sup>. Maria was taken to a room and subjected to various forms of torture, but she refused to talk. “They pushed me down on my knees while I was still handcuffed. They offered me money again, but I didn’t say a word. Then they got rougher. One of them started to beat me and choked me around the neck with his hands squeezing very tight”.<sup>142</sup>

However, this was only the beginning of the torture Maria was subjected to. The physical beating went on for another three days and nights. “After they administer all of these physical tortures, you get to a difficult point. They tell you they are going to kill your whole family. They told me that they had my sister and my children and they were going to kill them all.. It’s terrible to endure the methods of torture that they use on men, women, and on children too. They even rape people. They raped me”. After her interrogators raped her they came back and asked her how she felt, but she “couldn’t get up from the ground because they had beaten me so badly. I ached all over. They held a knife to me and said, ‘Now we are going to kill you. That’s when I felt the first cuts in

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<sup>140</sup> Tula 1994, 104

<sup>141</sup> Tula 1994, 131

<sup>142</sup> Tula 1994, 133

my stomach- lines with blood coming from them. I was pregnant”. But no one came to her aid, and when another guard entered the room under the pretense that he would treat her better, he instead “they me on the floor and the other asked, ‘No, no we can’t let women like her just leave. We have to take them and just fuck them’. And then they both raped me”<sup>143</sup>.

Maria’s experience is similar to the experience many women faced. Women were often raped by men in order to ensure the safety of a family member. For example one woman recalls that after her uncle was taken prisoner by the military they refused him basic essentials such as food and water. However, the military told her family that “If my mom came by that night to sleep with him, the next day he would give my uncle food”<sup>144</sup>. This example demonstrates that women were often forced to provide sexual favors to the military in order to assure the survival of family members and even themselves.

Thus, it is evident that women involved with the FMLN and popular organizations faced horrific torture and treatment at the hands of the military. Rape, physical, and psychological abuse were commonplace and left women traumatized and broken. With this in mind, the question of how women were treated within the revolutionary ranks must be addressed. It is evident that armed forces treated the woman differently from men due to their gender and now the question must be asked, did women face discrimination and violence from the FMLN, the very people they were supporting, as well?

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<sup>143</sup> Tula 1994, 134-135

<sup>144</sup> Kampwirth 2003, 63

## **Treatment of Women by the FMLN**

“We all worked, men and women, and there was mutual respect, it was quite lovely. We did that through the orientation of the church, with one helping another”<sup>145</sup>.

Another woman observes that relations between men and women within the FMLN “were like normal relations between brothers and sisters. There was equality; there was no discrimination, not like in normal life. The physical differences were the only ones”<sup>146</sup>. However, there were limits to this equality.

“There was respect between men and women... perhaps women did not rise up to the same leadership positions... there was disrespect at times, but I don’t think that was true in all the zones... they did discriminate against us for being women, but we did not see it at the time, we did not pay much attention... now we do care about the discrimination that occurred”<sup>147</sup>. The female combatants were highly respected by the men; however, they had to continually demonstrate that they could do the same as everybody else. “A woman had to act the same way that a man did, but at the same time, you had the contradiction that if you acted the same as a man you were criticized. A man was not criticized for his attitudes, but if a woman wanted to imitate the way that a man acted, you were criticized”<sup>148</sup>.

The equality between men and women was strongest in the early years of the FMLN. As the war progressed, the equality was compromised by” the extent to which we

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<sup>145</sup> Kampwirth 75, 2001 Interview, July 1, 1996,

<sup>146</sup> Kampwirth 75, 2001 Interview, July 1, 1996,

<sup>147</sup> Kampwirth 2001, 76, Interview, June 25, 1996

<sup>148</sup> Lety Mendes, Shayne 2004, 40

fell under the influence of militarization, verticalism, the notion of authority figures”<sup>149</sup>. When men and women were simply united together under a common goal there was equality, however when a military structure and authority came into the picture, as it did later in the war, so did the tradition of machismo and the traditional subjugation of women. Kampwirth demonstrates that “while the political values of equality and social justice that informed the revolutionary organizing would seem to preclude such sexism, the reality was that those organizations were the products of highly sexist societies, even if gender relations were often better within these organizations than in larger society”<sup>150</sup>. This gender inequality would range in intensity from overlooking women for promotion, to sexual harassment, to raping a fellow revolutionary.

Although this treatment of women was inconsistent with the FMLN’s public commitment to social justice, the harassment still occurred. “As long as the FMLN leaders admitted women into guerilla ranks without requiring that men change their relationships with those women, they were only setting up contradictions between the promise of social equality and the reality of continued inequality”<sup>151</sup>. Thus, it was not just from the military that women faced discrimination and acts of violence. Women continued to face violence from all sides due to or even in spite of their participation in the revolution. However, with the constant inequality and violence that women faced, it is important to note, that it was within the FMLN that women learned skills, gained independence, were treated with a new respect by men, and were empowered by the very

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<sup>149</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 78

<sup>150</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 11

<sup>151</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 17



thought that they were taking action. Through the involvement in the FMLN, women gained unexpected empowerment, which led drastic changes in their thinking.

## **Conclusion**

Participation in the FMLN had provided the women with the tools of empowerment through the acquisition of skills and knowledge. These skills and framework were both unintended consequences that women used to finally stop putting off their interests as women. As mentioned, most women did not enter the revolutionary forces with a desire for gender equality. They saw social injustice and entered the revolutionary struggle for their families, for their friends, and for the disappeared. The changes made in their thinking occurred as they entered the struggle selflessly, without the intention for change.<sup>152</sup> Yet their revolutionary activity provided them with a framework to view their experiences and showed them a means of change. Finally their own interests as women would be addressed.

Therefore it is obvious that women were not simply impacted by the Civil War. They did not stand by while the men fought. They fought as well from the framework of popular organizations and as combatants for the FMLN. They faced devastating consequences for their participation in this fight. However, the negative experiences as well as the important skills women gained through their participation in the Civil War armed them for the gender fight they would take up and directly impacted the issues and

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<sup>152</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 79-80

force with which they would fight. Although women did not originally join the FMLN to struggle for women's rights, a transition took place in the late 1980s, which caused women to begin to think about themselves, their inherent value, and their interests as women. When the Civil War ended with the Peace Accords in 1992 there was high hope that women's issues would finally be addressed, that women would have their chance. The next question is, however, did this take place? Through the Peace Accords was an environment created in which women would have more rights and be treated with equality or did women have to keep fighting, not in an armed struggle, but a struggle for themselves?

### Chapter 3: The Peace Accords and the Successful Development of Feminism in El Salvador

I had high hopes for the Peace Accords, but I quickly saw that they did not benefit women. With compañeras who were involved in CONAMUS, some of us women began to talk and reflect on our experiences.<sup>153</sup> We began to see that our lives had not changed significantly. It was at this point that our interests began to change. We started thinking about our own interests as women.<sup>154</sup>

The Peace Accords, signed in January of 1992, represented a step towards peace and the reorganization of society in El Salvador. They did not simply signify an agreement to stop the shooting, but rather an agreement to restructure society. These Accords mandated demilitarization, the legalization of the FMLN as a political party, the reduction of the armed forces, and the reform of the Constitution. These mandates and the required reform of the electoral and judicial systems and the establishment of commissions to identify those responsible for the worst human rights violations all signified a movement away from the chaos and violence that characterized Salvadoran society and a movement towards peace and democracy. With the signing of the Peace Accords many women had hoped that their issues would be addressed. The women

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<sup>153</sup> The National Coordinator of Salvadoran Women or CONMAS was founded in 1986 and promotes the development of women through education, training, and organization. CONMAS operates Comprehensive Care Clinics, which provide medical, psychological and legal assistance to victims of domestic violence, house shelters that provide temporary shelter for women with children who are victims of domestic violence, as well as legal counsel to education, guide, and prevent cases of violence in the communities. CONMAS serves in the departments of Chalatenango, Santa Ana, Ilobasco, and San Salvador.

<sup>154</sup> Irma Amaya, Interview July 14, 1997, Hipsher 142

activists of the FMLN expected that their sacrifices and contributions would be recognized in the Peace Accords and that they would gain new rights. These women, all women, harboring this hope, were gravely mistaken.<sup>155</sup> This chapter focuses on the actions of women and their response to the Peace Accords. It also follows the development of a specific feminism to El Salvador, the path taken by feminist organizations towards autonomy, and the question of why feminism was able to successfully develop in El Salvador.

The Peace Accords that ended the war in January 1992 did not address all of the issues affecting El Salvador at that time. One key issue not addressed was the blatant power inequality between men and women. “Neither in words nor in spirit is there any reference to women, despite the fact that they represent 52.9 % of the Salvadoran population, 30% of the 13,600 FMLN combatants that were verified (by the United Nations), and more than 60% of the civilian population that supported the guerillas during the armed conflict”.<sup>156</sup> One specific example was the exclusion of women from the postwar land reform.<sup>157</sup> Although certain high-ranking women within the FMLN were

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<sup>155</sup> Blumberg 2001, 164

<sup>156</sup> Murguialday, 1996, 36, Kampwirth 81

<sup>157</sup> For six years following the signing of the Peace Accords, 10% of the nation’s agricultural land was transferred to ex-combatants of both sides and to civilian supporters of the FMLN through the Land Transfer Program or the Programa de Transferencia de Tierras. Those eligible for land included ex-combatants from both the FMLN and the Salvadoran military as well as civilian supporters of the FMLN who had resided and farmed the land during the war. By 2000, over 36,000 people had received land. As the Peace Accords mandated, credit was given to beneficiaries in order to purchase the land and the beneficiaries would repay the government loans over a 30 years period with a fixed annual interest rate of 6%. There were many significant administrative, technical, and logistical problems, which delayed the implementation of the land transfer program. The most significant problem dealt with the determination of who was eligible to receive the land. Many female landowners were left off the final list of those to receive land. The requirement to present themselves at the newly opened regional offices of the government

granted land, the FMLN leaders compiling the lists of potential beneficiaries for the administration of the Land Transfer Program looked over or ignored women lacking strength and rank in the FMLN when the land was distributed.<sup>158</sup> Therefore due to this lack of recognition and exclusion in the Peace Accords, many women began to question their loyalty to the FMLN and instead focus on emphasizing women's rights and gender awareness.

It is evident that women did not fight in the Civil War with gender issues in mind. They fought for social justice and for better lives for their families. Lety Mendez illustrates that "we did not have a gender consciousness, before and during the war, but unconsciously we hoped that with change in society and from the class struggle, there was going to be a situation of equality for women".<sup>159</sup> However, as time progressed and women were excluded from the Peace Accords, women began to work within a gendered context and a feminism specific to El Salvador developed. Before addressing the development of this feminism, it is important to first address the difference between the concepts of gender interests versus feminist interests.<sup>160</sup>

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implementing agency, OCTA, posed a serious problem for much of the population. Although, the FMLN made this problem known, they failed to present the list of those left out until much later. For more information see: *The Politics of Peace and Resettlement through El Salvador's Land Transfer Programme: caught between the state and the market*. Ariane De Bremond 2007.

<sup>158</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 81

<sup>159</sup> Lety Mendez, interview 1998, Shane 1

<sup>160</sup> Gender Theory strives to improve the situation for women within their traditional roles in society. This theory does not challenge the traditional gender divisions of power and strives to meet basic needs such as food, water, and shelter.

## **Gender Interests vs. Feminist Interests**

Organizing based on gender interests focuses on the promotion of women's well-being within in the context of their traditional gendered roles without directly challenging the gender division of power. For example, the focus is placed on improving the lives of women as mothers, women in the home, women faithfully serving their husbands. This type of organizing focuses on meeting the basic needs of women without challenging power inequalities between men and women. It does not question the role of women as mothers; it accepts it fully and seeks to promote the well being of women within it. Feminist interests or organizing, on the other hand, directly and openly challenge the power inequalities between men and women. This organizing asks the question of what is the role of the woman? Is a woman just a mother? Feminist organizations work for strategic needs, for example access to child support or abortion.

The situation many women face in El Salvador is one of dire economic need. The majority of women live without a steady income and without the support from the father of their children. This lack of paternal support and employment forces many women to live and raise their children in poverty. Myra, a 28 year old mother of 5 lives just outside of San Salvador in a two room home made from cinder blocks and scrap metal held together mainly with sticks. She has no steady form of employment; instead she picks coffee and makes small trinkets to sell. Her five children range in age from 13 to 5 years old and are bright children, but do not have the necessary uniforms or notebooks for school. The father of these children lives near by; however, he does not acknowledge Myra or his children. Each week Myra struggles to make enough money to buy corn for

tortillas. Some months she cannot afford water and must ration out what they have or drink from the contaminated river. Her children will most likely not finish their education.<sup>161</sup>

An organization focusing on gender interests would respond very differently to this situation than a feminist organization. The gender interests perspective would focus on meeting Myra and her children's need for food and water and possible assistance with uniforms and notebooks for school. They would provide her with these basic needs or the means to obtain them. Gender interests organizations would not ask the question of why Myra and her children are in this situation, they would place their sole focus on providing them with food and water, and the necessary items to attend school.

Meeting the basic needs of people living in dire need is obviously essential and crucial to their survival. However, the feminist organizations would approach this situation differently. They too would begin by providing Myra with food, water, and the means to give her children an education. Her family cannot survive without these items. However, the feminist organizations would ask, "Why is Myra in this situation?" They would reflect on the societal factors influencing the situation Myra faces. Rather than simply providing Myra with food and water, they would discuss with her the opportunity to join or help create a program where women in the community could form small businesses such as selling tortillas or making and selling jewelry. They would also go a step further and investigate how being a woman has influenced Myra's situation. The question of her children's father and his lack of support would be raised. The feminist

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<sup>161</sup> Personal interviews Fall 2009

perspective would question why their father does not, according to society, have to support his children. They would argue that Myra has an equal right to child support from her partner. Therefore the feminist perspective looks beyond the basic needs to challenge the inherent gender inequalities between men and women.

In many situations the gender perspective is used by women who wish to identify with the struggle against the suffering of women, yet do not wish to identify themselves with organized feminists. This was often the case with right wing women, as they could not ally with the feminist perspective due to its association with the left without compromising their political identities. At an extreme, the gender perspective is considered a softer version of feminist theory used by women who simply wish to analyze gender inequality without doing anything about it.<sup>162</sup> Therefore the main difference between gender organizing, for basic needs, and feminist organizing for strategic needs, is that in their pursuit to improve the lives of women, feminist organizing directly and openly challenging the power inequalities between men and women, while gender organizing avoids this confrontation.

### **Definitions of Feminism**

Just as the important distinctions between the concepts of gender interests and feminist interests are crucial to the understanding of organizing in El Salvador today, the concept of feminism must be fully explored to shed light on any discontinuities between uses of the term feminism. Feminism cannot be used as an all-encompassing term to

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<sup>162</sup> Gonzales 2001, 16



designate women's movements throughout the globe. Feminism has several different connotations and can be used to represent different meanings in different situations. The differing meanings of the feminism specific to El Salvador and feminism specific to the United States illustrate this point.

The feminism that has developed in El Salvador is a "feminism that was very Salvadoran, a feminist movement that was notable for its roots in the Salvadoran left and that looked quite different from northern feminism".<sup>163</sup> The feminist perspective analyzes gender relations and challenges the inequalities between men and women.<sup>164</sup> It directly and openly challenges the existing power inequalities and "seeks to transform the roles society assigns to women, challenging existing gender power arrangements, and claims women's right to personal autonomy and equality".<sup>165</sup>

Salvadoran feminism differs from North American feminism or academic feminism.<sup>166</sup> While this North American or academic feminism, has given up on the big picture and retreated into transgressive personal actions in an attempt to challenge social inequality, Salvadoran feminism is holistic in nature and focuses on the global quality and big picture for women. Women in El Salvador are attempting to assert their rights as women to equal economic opportunity, access to education, and political involvement. However, to some feminists working from the North American or academic perspective,

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<sup>163</sup> Kampwirth 110, 2004

<sup>164</sup> Gonzales 16, 2001

<sup>165</sup> Kampwirth 8, 2004

<sup>166</sup> North American or Academic feminism refers to the feminist theory developed in North American University that asserts women's rights through personalistic agendas such as freedom to wear the clothing one wishes, freedom to act how one wishes to act, and freedom and complete control over one's physical body.

Salvadoran feminists are not feminist enough. Robin Morgan, an international feminist and author said “North American feminist activists need to understand the enormity of the word ‘feminist’ ... Women need to participate in defining development or it will continue to exploit women more”.<sup>167</sup> The academic feminists are focusing on their personal, individual rights, for example in how they wish to dress or how they wish to live out their sexuality. The feminists in El Salvador find this mysterious as they are still working towards achieving basic rights.

The difference between these two feminisms is best illustrated by Domitilia de Barrios Chungara.<sup>168</sup> “There was a group of women who came up with things like ‘Why is a man allowed to get drunk whenever he wants to? Why can’t a women do that?’ We don’t want to talk about these issues. Our background is different and our needs are different. These feminists don’t see the main issue, the issue for which we women in Latin America and throughout the whole third world are struggling. This is the liberation of our land. That’s why we don’t want to talk to these kinds of feminists. I personally, and we women of Latin America, don’t accept the machismo of our compañeros. But we don’t accept that kind of feminism either”.<sup>169</sup>

Thus, it is evident that feminism cannot be used as an all-encompassing term to designate a movement fighting for the rights of women. The Salvadoran feminism, with its roots in the Salvadoran left and direct challenge to the gender inequalities does not differ from North American or academic feminism completely as they are both working

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<sup>167</sup> Cargo Sharon. *Off Our Backs*. 1991

<sup>168</sup> Bolivian Mineworker’s Wives Organizer and author of *Let Me Speak*

<sup>169</sup> Domitilia de Barrios Chungara, taken from a speech at the World Conference in Copenhagen, 1980, reported in the *Newsfront International* in September 1980

to improve the lives of women. However, the broader and less personal feature of Salvadoran feminism distinguishes it from feminism in North America and establishes its unique character that influences the actions of Salvadoran feminists working today.

Therefore, with the nuances between gender interests and feminist interests as well as the difference between North American and Salvadoran feminism established, we can now focus on who became a feminist and why, why feminism was able to form in El Salvador, and the legacy of this feminism, namely the development of the feminist organizations that are still acting in El Salvador today.

### **Who became a Feminist?**

“Feminists were not born, they were created. Central American feminists were created by decades of armed and unarmed social struggle”.<sup>170</sup> The discussion of which women became feminists is similar to the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding why women joined the revolutionary movement. However, the difference lies in that not all women who joined the revolutionary movements became feminists or joined the feminist organizations. Thus, who exactly were these women that became feminists? It was most common for women within the FMLN and revolutionary movements who were of mid-prestige, or members of rank and file who served in combat or had some authority in carrying out traditional women’s work such as nursing, to become part of the feminist movement.<sup>171</sup> Women of mid- prestige were not shielded from the brunt of machismo

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<sup>170</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 7

<sup>171</sup> The term mid-prestige was coined by Karen Kampwirth in *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* and refers to women on the left spectrum of Salvadoran society who were neither the

within the guerilla ranks, as were the high-ranking female commanders. However, mid-prestige women were able to form political skills and consciousness that the lowest ranking female participants were unlikely to develop. Following the war, life for mid prestige women was more dismal than it was before the war. They could not, like the high prestige women, move into prestigious roles in civilian life, nor could they simply return to their subjugated existence.

The lower-ranking women were less likely to develop organizing skills or consciousness to organize and right their subjugated roles. The opportunities for mid-prestige women were actually more dismal than before the war as they often had to drop out of school and turn down job opportunities in order to join the revolutionary conflict. Therefore, with the combination of their skills, grievances, political socialization, and transformation of consciousness, mid-prestige women turned to feminism in greater numbers than women of other levels of prestige.<sup>172</sup>

### **The Fight For Autonomy**

Crucial to the development of the feminist movement in El Salvador was the fight for autonomy. “Movement autonomy is understood as the capacity to define, in a

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higher ranking officials in the FMLN or Popular Organizations that maintained a sense of authority and respect from both the men and women serving below them nor the lowest ranking women in Salvadoran society, such as women from very poor rural areas acting with little to no authority. Mid-prestige women usually had some education and worked as organizers under the leaders of the popular organization or as nurses or cooks within the FMLN forces. Kampwirth uses this term specifically to demonstrate the difference in consciousness that took place following the war. Crucial to the idea of mid- prestige women is that they did not have enough authority to be shielded from the machismo during the war, but had enough authority to gain the skills and understanding necessary to understand that it was unacceptable and they could do something to change it.

<sup>172</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 11

sovereign way, (the movements) own objectives and ways of struggling and to make demands that it considers important and current for women and for the whole society”.<sup>173</sup>

This struggle for autonomy can be seen in both right and left wing women. Women on the right often held subordinate positions in their organizations and saw gender inequality as natural and unchangeable. Although, they were less likely to seek autonomy formally due to the political repercussions, they too saw the benefits that autonomy could offer. Women on the left understood that it would only be through their assertion of independence that women’s groups could negotiate as equals rather than dependents. They also knew that if they were to stay within the organizations they would stay subordinated. The leftist parties, however, actively discouraged the development of autonomous organizations. “We had a lot of difficulties, at first, because there were so many impediments. One of them was economic. Previously, we had gotten all of our financial support from the party. So, when we started working on issues that the party didn’t like, like sex workers, the party took away a lot of our funding. We went through a crisis period in which we had to support ourselves with our own resources”.<sup>174</sup>

The organization, Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida or Las DIGNAS was the first women’s organization to seek autonomy.<sup>175</sup> The formation of Las DIGNAS as well as the other significant women’s organizations and their actions will be further explored in the following chapter, however to demonstrate the fight for autonomy it is necessary to mention three important women’s organizations here. Las DIGNAS was founded by the

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<sup>173</sup> Gonzales 2001, 17, Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida, Hacer política desde las mujeres 109

<sup>174</sup> Carmen Rodríguez Interview July 7 1997, Hipsher 145

<sup>175</sup> Women for Dignity and Life, DIGNAS

guerilla organization in the 1980s. Once the DIGNAS demanded autonomy from their guerilla patrons, nearly all other groups followed suit behind them. The DIGNAS desired to work for women's rights rather than to simply serve as helpmates for the guerillas. "In response to our claim that we had the right to choose the path of the organization by ourselves, the party responded by accusing us of being out of line, divisive, and radical. We went from one region to another explaining to local leaders that we had no intention of dividing the revolutionary ranks, but they were not open to our arguments. They made fun of us and the name we had chosen, they made up stories to undermine our reputation, they closed off our access to the former war zones and to material and financial support".<sup>176</sup> Therefore, the FMLN essentially closed the door to cooperation with DIGNAS and the DIGNAS had no choice but to fight for autonomy.

Although the DIGNAS had the greatest impact on the movement towards emancipation on other women's organizations, it was the Centro de Estudios de la Mujer or CEMUJER that was the first autonomous women's organization in El Salvador.<sup>177</sup> CEMUJER was formed after the murder of Norma Guirola, an intellectual, communist, and feminist, who was murdered by the military for working with the Instituto de Investigación, Capacitación, y Desarrollo de la Mujer or IMU.<sup>178</sup> CEMUJER was created to protect and promote the human rights of women.

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<sup>176</sup> Las Dignas 1993, 119-120, Kampwirth 2004 83

<sup>177</sup> Center of Women's Studies, CEMJUER

<sup>178</sup> The Institute of Investigation, Training, and Development of Women, IMU is feminist think tank that was created by Norma Guirola in August of 1986

Another important feminist organization that illustrates the fight for autonomy is the Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas or ADEMUSA.<sup>179</sup> ADEMUSA was formed in 1988 in attempt to eradicate all forms of social discrimination. Although the Communist Party continued to plan activities to promote the well being of women and women's issues, "They always put off our activities. That was a process at the level of the institution, but also at a personal level".<sup>180</sup> Thus, confronting the resistance, the women of ADEMUSA requested independence from the Communist Party. The Communist Party responded by calling them traitors. This comment only led the women to strengthen their resolve for autonomy and this general sentiment only fueled the desire of other women's organizations to seek autonomy.

Important to the battle for autonomy was the participation of Salvadoran feminists in the Encuentros Feministas. The Encuentros Feministas or feminist gatherings were both a cause and product of the battle for autonomy.<sup>181</sup> The Encuentros Feministas helped many women to realize that they were not alone in the struggle and showed them that rebellion in-group is easier than rebelling on their own. One of the most important Encuentros Feministas was the 6<sup>th</sup> Latin American Feminist Gathering held in Costa del Sol, El Salvador in 1993. This Encuentro took place only one year following the end of the War. The response to this meeting was fierce and critical. The organizers were accused by members of the right or ARENA party of lesbianism, of inflicting AIDS on El Salvador, and of being controlled by the US-based organization, the Committee in

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<sup>179</sup> Association of Salvadoran Women or ADEMUSA

<sup>180</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 89

<sup>181</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 90

Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Death threats were issued against five of the Salvadoran women who organized the conference and “On May 20<sup>th</sup> of this year the organizations office was ransacked. The office was set on fire and the off duty officer of the Civilian Police present at their office was murdered.”<sup>182</sup>

Thus, although, this Encuentro was a huge step for feminism in El Salvador, it also illustrated the continued violence and power inequality between women and men in El Salvador. The Encuentros Feministas provided women with the opportunity to talk about these existing inequalities and provided them the opportunity to learn more about feminist ideology.<sup>183</sup> Through their discussion with other feminists and the space these Encuentros provided women, the pressure to seek autonomy and the reasons for it were strengthened and made more obvious. Therefore, the fight for autonomy was a crucial step for women’s organizations in El Salvador. Through autonomous women’s organizations they were better able to formulate the successful Salvadoran feminism they were characterized by and to better create programs and initiatives to serve women and children in El Salvador.

### **The Successful Formation of Feminism in El Salvador**

Why was this feminism successfully able to form in El Salvador? As mentioned “none of them (the women) joined in the guerilla struggle with the goal of revolutionizing gender relations”.<sup>184</sup> Nonetheless, in the case of El Salvador it is clear that feminism and

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<sup>182</sup> Member of the MSM, interview, August 2, 1994, Kampwirth 2004, 97

<sup>183</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 92

<sup>184</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 2



the revolution are linked. The revolutionary struggle contained the seeds of feminist consciousness and organizing that only germinated following the completion of the military state of the movement. The mobilization of women in the guerilla wars led some women, women of mainly mid prestige, to become feminists. The time women spent in the guerilla movements and the skills they gained constitute a set of important factors namely ideology, personal transformations, preexisting networks, and international factors that influenced them in their development of feminism.

## **Ideology**

The first factor is an ideological factor. The time women spent in the guerilla movements was the first opportunity in which the women were treated with more equality by men. As mentioned in the previous chapter, men and women within the revolutionary ranks fought and worked together sharing in a sense of equality, although with limits. However following the war, the men in the revolutionary ranks expected women to return to “normal”. Many former FMLN comrades responded poorly when the women in the FMLN resisted the return to their traditional gender roles following the war. “They called us traitors, that we had betrayed the blood of the comrades who fell in battle”.<sup>185</sup> Thus, “it was not that the gender inequality was any worse than it had been, but rather that the women who had been mobilized into new ways of thinking and acting were no longer as willing to accept such inequality as natural”.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 75

<sup>186</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 5

## **Personal Transformation**

Another factor that influenced the development of feminism as a consequence of the revolution is the impact of organizing on the women. Many women were personally transformed through their participation in the guerilla movement. They gained new organizing skills, a new confidence in their abilities, and thus felt that they had the ability to do something about their situation. From their revolutionary experiences they gained the knowledge necessary to organize women and fight for their own interests. The power of preexisting networks or the guerilla sponsorship of the women's organization is another important factor that allowed for the success of feminism.

## **Preexisting Networks**

Although many women's organizations were initially formed by the guerillas to provide logistical support to the troops, the organizations "went on to redefine their missions as that of promoting feminist goals".<sup>187</sup> Thus, these organizations initially formed for the guerillas acted as a strong preexisting network from which the feminist organizations could grow. Another preexisting network important to the successful formulation of feminism in El Salvador is the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church and liberation theology set the stage for the rise of feminism. This new thinking provided the theological underpinning for women's participation in revolution and the ideas of equality. As previously mentioned, the Catholic Church in El Salvador has not limited itself to caring for the spiritual needs of the people, but also

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<sup>187</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 6

concerns itself with the material needs and general well-being of the people. Liberation theology finds its roots in scripture and is a social movement “characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities, grass-roots churches, and the preferential option for the poor. This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities.”<sup>188</sup>

During the Civil War as well as following the end of the war, women represented the numerical majority both in neighborhood churches and the base communities. The scarcity of men, with the lack of trained religious, and the impact of liberation theology allowed the Catholic Church to look to women for pastoral needs. Thus, many women in Latin America found their neighborhood Churches as a convenient and safe place to try out new leadership skills and the Salvadoran Church witnessed the growing importance of women in positions of authority in the Church.<sup>189</sup> The Church therefore supported many women in the development of leadership skills, which they later utilized in their involvement in the feminist organizations.

These national factors were all crucial to the formation of the Salvadoran feminism. There are, however, several international factors that must be mentioned as they likewise, though less significantly impacted the formation of feminism. The international factor must be mentioned as “movements in one country can have significant influence on those in another, especially when those countries share as much common history and culture as do El Salvador and Nicaragua.”<sup>190</sup> Women’s

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<sup>188</sup> Burke, 1-7

<sup>189</sup> Taylder 2002, 51

<sup>190</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 99

organizations in both countries formed broad coalitions in an attempt to influence electoral politics in their countries as well as to increase communication between the activists in both countries. The feminism in El Salvador was by no means contingent on the movement taking place in Nicaragua, yet there was a “catalytic influence of feminists from Nicaragua.”<sup>191</sup>

### *International Factors*

This international influence extends past Nicaragua. Feminists from all over the world attended the Encuentros Feministas, which had greatly impacted Salvadoran feminism. For example, Kampwirth presents Catia<sup>192</sup>, a feminist born in Spain had a key role in the DIGNAS decisions to seek autonomy from the FMLN. As the Sandistas in Nicaragua called for foreigners with professional credentials to help rebuild the country and construct the revolution, Catia responded to their call as well. In 1991, she worked for the Puntos de Encuentro, an autonomous feminist movement in Nicaragua and visited El Salvador on a regular basis.<sup>193</sup> Another member of this organization and partner of Catia, Nina, facilitated the DIGNAS first intense feminist seminar, which included a week on sexuality, followed by a week of feminist theory.

The impact of this international feminism can be further seen the role of the United States. Despite that, “during the war, the government of the United States had been solidly on the side of the Salvadoran military in its war against the revolutionaries

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<sup>191</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 100

<sup>192</sup> Interview July 17, 1997, Kampwirth 2004

<sup>193</sup> The Meeting Place is a Feminist Organization in Nicaragua.

providing \$3.6 billion in aid for the war effort”, the US also had a large impact on the funding of the feminist groups in El Salvador following the war.<sup>194</sup> Many of the women’s organizations that had been created by the guerillas were receiving aid from USAID following the war.<sup>195</sup> This change in foreign policy towards El Salvador can be explained with the transition from the Reagan and Bush administration to the Clinton administration as well as the end of the Cold War, which had been the government’s justification for funding the Salvadoran government against the guerillas in the first place. With the Cold War policy of strict anti- communism subsiding as well as the end of the Civil War, the US now felt that it could provide aid to the feminist organizations without fear of actually funding the FMLN and other leftist organizations. Thus, the funds given by the United States provided several feminist organizations with the necessary economic support and impacted their success.

Therefore, it is evident that the feminist movement in El Salvador was able to successfully form due to both international and national factors. Those international factors included the emergence of regular conferences in which women’ rights activists could exchange ideas, the influence of international feminism, specifically from Nicaragua, and the influence of international funding agencies, such as the USAID. Nonetheless, these international factors all influenced the feminist movement in El Salvador in a secondary fashion. The international feminists brought new ideas to Salvadoran feminism, but did not cause the feminism to form initially. The Encuentros

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<sup>194</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 106

<sup>195</sup> USAID or the United States Agency for International Development is the United States federal government agency, which is responsible for administering civilian foreign aid. President Kennedy created USAID in 1961.

Feministas provided opportunities for Salvadoran feminists to learn new consciousness raising skills, but did initiate the desire to raise consciousness. Finally, the aid provided by the United States and other international agencies helped the feminist organizations to continue to provide services, yet were not responsible the desire to provide this services in the first place. Therefore, although both international factors and national factors influenced the successful development of Salvadoran feminism, the national factors lie at the heart of this feminism and are the factors that directly impacted the formation of this feminism and its success.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, following the Peace Accords, which did not address the needs or hopes of women, a feminism unique to El Salvador emerged. Feminist organizations are still acting, programming, and working in El Salvador today. But what impact have their actions had on Salvadoran society? Which organizations have been the most successful? Where have they succeeded and how has this impacted Salvadoran society? All of these questions get at the heart of what the feminist organizations are doing in El Salvador. What these women are striving to accomplish through the feminist organizations and what their legacy will be for El Salvador is the next pivotal question that must be addressed.

## Ch 4: The Feminist Organizations and the New Nation

### **Introduction: The New National Narrative**

There are over 100 women's organizations operating in El Salvador today, each with its own specific local and regional projects. However, the feminist organizations, acting as a whole, have had the largest impact on the new nation that is forming in El Salvador. In fact, these feminist organizations are realigning the national values of El Salvador and creating a new nation through the reconstruction of gender roles, through the recognition and promotion of new nation heroes, and through their legislative impact which has begun to mandate new values in society. This new organic narrative of El Salvador tells the story of a people who value human dignity, respect, equality and responsibility. The feminist organizations are the most effective force operating in El Salvador today.

### **A Look Into the Feminist Organizations and their Agenda**

As the feminism of El Salvador is specific to El Salvador, so too are the aims and goals of each the feminists organizations. Even though many of the feminist organizations have their own specific missions, there is a similar agenda that distinguish the work of the feminist organizations in El Salvador. Vilma Vasquez, the cofounder of Las DIGNAS and the Avocación de Madres Demandantes illustrates this best when

talking about AMD.<sup>196</sup> “Our organization is helping women fight and be active leaders who create changes and transformations... there is a sort of mutual, reciprocal support... It is a place where women do not see themselves as alone but rather see that the problem is the same for us all, so we build solidarity and strengthen the ties among ourselves”.<sup>197</sup>

Therefore, the feminist organizations acting in solidarity with one another are most effectively influencing the new nation that is emerging. The first element on the agenda of all feminist organizations is meeting the material needs of the poor women in El Salvador. The feminist organization, LAS DIGNAS, most clearly exemplifies this focus on meeting the material needs of women, but also demonstrates the shift away from material needs as their only focus. LAS DIGNAS has been historically one of the most influential women’s organizations in El Salvador. Women from various groups began in to meet in 1990 and have discussions about women’s issues. They acknowledged, “We didn’t want to repeat the same history and build an organization of women that simply support the general struggles. That was an experience that we had had. We were clearer about what we didn’t want than what we did want. This was our starting point”.<sup>198</sup>

The women no longer wanted to blindly lend their support to the Left and the guerilla forces, they desired an opportunity to examine and address their own issues as women. The leadership of LAS DIGNAS consisted largely of ex-guerillas who had returned to San Salvador following the war. LAS DIGNAS started without resources, without an office, and without any sense of infrastructure. However, they began holding

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<sup>196</sup> Association of Mother’s Seeking Child Support, AMD

<sup>197</sup> Vilma Vasquez, co founder of Las DIGNAS and AMD

<sup>198</sup> Morena Herrera, one of the founders of Las DIGNAS



workshops and their earliest projects were aimed to satisfy the practical needs of women, such as food and clean water. Later, however, LAS DIGNAS attempted to introduce their participants to a feminist analysis of their situations.

This shift in direction came as LAS DIGNAS grew frustrated with the dependent relationships between themselves and the poor women with whom they worked. They wanted to avoid developing a group of clients simply dependent on them for material needs and to instead raise the consciousness of women and to assist the women in becoming independent themselves. They desired to form relationships and forge change, and thus in 1993, they formally altered the focus of the organizations to organize women to act in response to feminist issues.<sup>199</sup> This shift in direction is common among the other important feminist organizations of El Salvador. Although meeting the basic needs of women is a common theme on all of the agenda's of the feminist organizations, it is also a theme many desire to surpass in order to address other issues.

Another crucial issue present on the agenda of the feminist organizations is the fight for equality. The feminist organizations, each in its own unique ways, are fighting for gender, economic, and political equality. They are also fighting for an end to gender violence, domestic violence, and sexism. El Centro de Estudios de La Mujer or CEMUJER is just one of the feminist organizations whose fight focuses on gender-based violence.<sup>200</sup> CEMUJER was formed on August 17, 1990 to combat gender-based violence against women, children, and adolescents. In order to combat violence against women, CEMUJER provides rights-based education, health clinics, legal council,

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<sup>199</sup> Women for Dignity and Life: Lets Break the Silence

<sup>200</sup> Center of Women's Studies, CEMUJER

domestic violence hotlines, and workshops on gender, law, and human rights. The Melida Anya Montes Women's Movement or MAM is another feminist organization that works to combat gender inequalities, specifically in the form of sexism within the Left. MAM was organized on July 25, 1992 in response to the blatant sexism with in and since their formation they have made great strides in education and empowering women to demand their rights for formal and informal workshops and meetings.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, the feminist organizations are demanding the rights of women be observed and respected. As a unified group their voice can be heard calling for an end to gender-based violence and a general call for gender, economic, and political equality.

The use of a feminist analysis to examine of the lives and situation of women in El Salvador is another element present in the agenda of the feminist organizations. The Asociación de Madres Demandantes was formed in 1995 by LAS DIGNAS to specifically promote an understanding of gender as socially constructed as well as to challenge this construction of gender and its most serious repercussions specifically with irresponsible fatherhood and child support.<sup>202</sup> Therefore the AMD was created to change the perspectives surrounding the conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood in El Salvador, a similar idea shared by many of the feminist organizations operating in El Salvador today. As a whole, they view gender as socially constructed and thus are working towards changing the way gender is viewed in Salvadoran society.

The agendas of the feminist organizations generally consist of the same common components: meeting the material needs of women, fighting for equality, and the

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<sup>201</sup> Shayne 2004, 57

<sup>202</sup> Association of Mother's Seeking Child Support

incorporation of an understanding of gender as socially constructed. The feminist organizations in El Salvador are working together to empower women, to aid them in their material needs, to demand equality, to demand rights, and to end violence. “We want to help regain the value of life, so much has been denied us, because our lives have been attacked so violently. When one is denied the right to work, to study, or when one goes hungry, or lacks milk to feed one’s children, there is an unjust violence placed upon them”.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, the feminist organizations are most effectively influencing the new nation that is emerging and constructing a new organic national narrative for El Salvador. The feminist organizations creating this new nation through the reconstruction of gender roles, through the recognition and promotion of new nation heroes, and through their legislative impact which has begun to mandate new values in society.

### **Reconstructing Gender Roles**

The feminist movement in El Salvador rejects the notion that gender roles are inherent and natural, but instead endorses the idea that gender roles have been socially constructed to ensure female subordination.<sup>204</sup> Thus, for the feminist organizations, if fatherhood and motherhood have been socially constructed, it is also possible that they can be reconstructed, in a way that promotes equality and partnership.

In an effort to promote the understanding of gender as socially constructed, as well as to confront this notion, the feminist organizations are challenging “irresponsible fatherhood”. In El Salvador irresponsible fatherhood is an epidemic. Salvadoran society

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<sup>203</sup> Taken from Remembrance, a talk given at a meeting of Las DIGNAS in July 1990

<sup>204</sup> Ready 2003, 170

requires motherhood, while fatherhood remains an option. Society dictates that maternity is a major achievement and a necessity in a woman's life. Women are valued as mothers, and this stereotype has been created and reinforced by society. For women in El Salvador, maternity is a fate, not a choice. However, traditionally fathers only retain responsibility for their children if they remain with the mother of the children. Vilma Vasquez explains that [irresponsible fatherhood] is undignified for a child and also a great trauma for society as a whole, to come into this world being rejected and denied by your father. There is never any question about... who the mother of a child is... but the father chooses; a woman has no choice to opt whether she wants to be a mother or not, but a man has the privilege of saying whether or not he wants to be responsible, whether he will or will not be the child's father".<sup>205</sup>

Thus, once a father has severed ties with the mother, the father can simply deny the existence of his children. This denial or irresponsible fatherhood is acceptable and the norm in Salvadoran society. This is precisely what the feminist organizations are directly challenging. Rather than endorsing the idea that mothers are inherently and without question the sole caretakers of children, feminists reject this notion as it has been socially constructed and instead promote the value of equality within parenting. Through social and educational gatherings, formal and informal discussions, and workshops the feminist organizations promote the idea of equal parenting to mothers and strive to raise their consciousness on this issue. Although the promotion of this ideal is important, the women

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<sup>205</sup> Vilma Vasquez, co founder of Las DIGNAS and AMD

of El Salvador themselves must believe in the equality of parenthood and also desire the reconstruction of gender roles.

Furthermore by embracing the notion that gender roles are constructed, the feminist organizations are demonstrating the idea that motherhood is not the only option for women. Motherhood does not have to be the fate all of women, but instead a choice. The feminist organizations strive to demonstrate to women the separation between sexuality and motherhood. This distinction illustrates that contrary to what Salvadoran society has infused in young girls, that women can embrace their sexuality as women and separate it from the notion of motherhood. The feminist organizations argue that it is possible and acceptable to be a woman who has embraced her sexuality, yet who is independent and without children. They are directly challenging the traditional relationship between men and women in Salvadoran society and demonstrating to women that motherhood is not their only option and for fathers with children, ignoring their responsibility is no longer an option. The understanding that gender roles have been constructed in society to subjugate women is a crucial idea that the feminist organizations are attempting to infuse in the fabric of Salvadoran society.

In order to effectively infuse the understanding of the social construction of gender roles and the notion that motherhood and fatherhood should be seen equally, the feminist organizations have made great strides in the fight for child support. Inherent in this fight are the values of equality between men and women and the notion of reconstructing the gender roles. Although, one cannot put a price on children, the economic support child that support provides greatly impacts the lives of mothers and

children. The fight for child support, however, has not been an easy fight for the feminist organizations.

In the 1950's the Procuradora General de La Republica or PGR was established to provide relief to the elderly, the infirm, and abandoned children.<sup>206</sup> The PGR's constitution mandated it to "watch over the deference of the family and of persons, and the interests of minors and others incapable of taking care of themselves".<sup>207</sup> Thus, women who sought to obtain child support previous to the battle of Las DIGNAS and the AMD, had to work directly with the PGR and actually obtaining child support was nearly impossible.

Many of the women who came to file a claim against the fathers of their children were not legally married to their fathers and this holds true today as well. The alleged fathers, therefore, initially would deny paternity, even when they knew it to be true. The recognition of paternity was essential to obtaining child support historically and was often unsuccessful, prolonged, and always extremely painful and humiliating for the women involved.<sup>208</sup> Many women would simply give up in the process as the fathers would ignore summons to attend meetings and the police would ignore arrest warrants for the fathers. The women themselves would waste precious funds in traveling to the PGR to attend the meeting the fathers would ignore and thus, once their limited funds ran out had to simply give up on the process.

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<sup>206</sup> Procuradora General de La Republica or PGR, the Attorney General of the Republic

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Miguel Angel Cardozo on January 7, 1997

<sup>208</sup> Ready 2003, 61-62

If paternity was established and the father did attend a meeting to which he was summoned, which was very rare, a mutually acceptable amount would be set and the father would be forced to pay this child support. Therefore, it is evident that before the work of the feminist organizations, the collection of child support was a rare and extremely difficult process. Despite the efforts of the PGR in the area of child support, society continued to condone irresponsible fatherhood. The feminist organizations challenged this through the legislation passed to combat irresponsible fatherhood.

With the force of the feminist organizations, several key bills passed the Legislature and changed the situation of child support in El Salvador. Crucial to the child support issue are the Non- Arrears Bill and Decree 568. The Non- Arrears Bill requires that all candidates for elected office get a legal clearance from the AMD that they are not in arrears for child support payments. An important example of this Bill can be seen through Walter Araujo, the head of the ARNEA Youth Group. Araujo was the poster boy of the ARENA party; he was young, handsome, and articulate. However, it was made evident that he owed over thirty thousand colones, around \$3,500 to his ex wife in child support and had to pay this debt for receiving his clearance. This example demonstrates the importance this bill plays and the example it sets to members of all classes.

Decree 568 is another important piece of legislation relevant to the child support issue. Decree 568 requires that 30% of severance pay be deducted and handed over to mothers seeking child support before men working for government agencies would retire.

Before a former partner was to retire, the woman is now notified in time to guarantee that she and her children can access the funds.<sup>209</sup>

What is most significant about this fight for child support is that the feminist organizations did not demand that the state provide for the basic needs of women and children, instead they worked to change the gender construction causing the problematic situation. Rather than demand of the government to solve their problem, they instead worked to infuse into Salvadoran society the idea that men and women are equal in their responsibility to their children and that the cultural trait of irresponsible fatherhood is simply no longer acceptable in society today. Therefore, the feminist organizations work towards reconstruction gender roles have greatly impacted society and begun to realign the national values of El Salvador and create a new nation with less traditional notions of motherhood and fatherhood.

### **Writing a New Narrative through New National Heroes**

The feminist organizations' creation of a new nation in El Salvador is also evident through the new national heroes propagated and supported by the feminist organizations. A hero is defined by the courageous action and sacrifice. Heroes are considered exceptional people who embody perseverance, determination, and an unwavering focus on an injustice they strive to undo. Martin Luther King Jr. is an example of a national hero in the United States. His dedication to the Civil Right's movement, pacifism, and relentless pursuit of a more equal society demonstrate his character and commitment to

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<sup>209</sup> Ready 2003, 183



ending the injustice of racial discrimination in the United States. Furthermore, he is an inspirational figure and role model for the American people. Both men and women, of any race, can look to Martin Luther King's example and dedication to justice and decide to live their lives working for justice as well. National heroes are, therefore, crucial to the social fabric of a nation. They provide the people with a framework, an example of what it means to be a member of that country.

Thus, the emergence of a set of national heroes and role models for the Salvadoran people, especially for women demonstrates a shift in the values of El Salvador and clearly illustrates the effective impact the feminist organizations are having on the new nation that is emerging in El Salvador. The mere fact that this new nation has national heroes applicable to women indicates an obvious change in the character of the Salvadoran nation. Historically El Salvador has had few national heroes due to the repressive and hierarchical nature of forms of government that has plagued El Salvador. Rather than the veneration of a specific person, El Salvador has historically turned to mythology and religion for the role of national heroes. The changes in those venerated before and after the Civil War demonstrate the changes taking place in society and reflect the values, which the feminist organizations are instilling in the new nation, which is forming under and with their influence. The new national heroes, Romero, Maria Theresa Tula, Gonzales in contrast to the ideas Marianismo and the traditional gendered role of men and women, embody and instill the new values the feminist organizations are infusing in the nation. These new national heroes tell a new narrative, each contributing a

crucial and different vein, composing the organic narrative the newly forming nation in El Salvador.

## **Marianismo**

In the patriarchal Catholic culture with God as the father and only men having the ability to become priests, Mary stood as the prominent image of what an ideal woman should be. Throughout history men have had local leaders and religious leaders to look to as role models and heroes. There were a variety of options open for men to aspire to. Men could aspire to have strong religious convictions, to be an outstanding leader, or to be a hard worker. Women, however, only had one hero or one person to aspire to be like: Mary. Mary was the single and prominent image for what it meant to be a woman in Salvadoran society. Marianismo has created a central figure and a set of fixed assumptions and characteristics for the actions of women. How well a woman lived up to the example of Mary, the feminine virtues, determined her reputation.<sup>210</sup> This stereotype for the ideal woman surpassed every social obstacle and influenced every social class.

Marianismo is not a religious practice, although the term Marianism is used to describe a movement within the Roman Catholic Church, which venerates the figure of the Virgin Mary. The key characteristics of Marianismo include the perspective that women maintain a sense of semi divinity, moral superiority, and spiritual strength. This spiritual strength engenders the infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. According to Marianismo there is no limit to the patient, self-denying woman who is submissive to the

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<sup>210</sup> Pescatello 1973

demands of men: husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers. Beneath this submissiveness lies the conviction that men must be humored for they are like little boys, whose foolishness must be forgiven because they cannot help it.<sup>211</sup>

A fashion editor of a popular women's magazine illustrates the stereotype women have been forced to embrace. "Sincerely, I would mention a humble woman from the slums who did our laundry. She had ten children, and her husband spent his time drunk and out of work. She took in washing and ironing, and gave her children a good start in life. She is the typical woman of a sector of our society. She struggles valiantly until the end".<sup>212</sup> Thus, the only role model women had to look to for inspiration before the Civil War was Mary. This example mandated that they exhibit patience at all times, that they suffer silently with inner religious strength, that they submit to their husbands, brothers, and sons and that they never question their suffering or their role in society. They have been told to accept and embrace the suffering in their life, to take on their grief as Mary did, without question and with complete compliance. Although many of these characteristics, perseverance, inner strength, strong religious convictions, can be positive personality traits, women in El Salvador have been given no other options. Society dictates that they adopt the example of Mary and Mary alone.

However, the availability of national heroes and role models has expanded for women considerably since the Civil War. This gain in role models has expanded two fold in that not only was there a large increase in female role models- combatants, organizers,

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<sup>211</sup> Yeager 1994, 9

<sup>212</sup> Rosa Cruchaga de Walker and Lillian Calm, "Quien es la mujer chilena?" *Mundo Nuevo*, no. 46 (April 1970), pp.33-38.

religious leaders, but also for the first time in Salvadoran society women could begin to look to prominent male religious leaders as examples and inspiration as well. Three models that demonstrate expansion of national heroes from women outside of the realm of Mary include Oscar Romero, Maria Teresa Tula, and Ana Guadalupe Gonzales. Oscar Romero, a prominent religious figure, Tula a female political organizer, and Gonzales a female ex-combatant and political organizer represent three areas in which women's role are expanding and three new national heroes that embody the values of the feminist organizations.

### **Monsignor Oscar Romero**

The Catholic clergy played a key role in the Civil War and the transformation of peasant consciousness. Monsignor Romero and his support of liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor were crucial to his influence on the Salvadoran people.<sup>213</sup> Romero was a symbol of hope for the Salvadoran people. His decision to speak out against the oppression, publish the names of the disappeared, defend the mass organizations, and his pleas to end the murdering of innocent people made him a well known and beloved figure of Salvadoran society. The Salvadoran people viewed him "as their own bishop, as a prophet, as a father".<sup>214</sup> His murder on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1980 made him

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<sup>213</sup> Preferential Option for the poor is a term coined by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1967 at the Latin American Bishop's Conference at Medellin. It refers to the claim that the principle of a preferential concern for the poor is present in both the Old and New Testament and that Christians are obligated to create conditions in which the voices of the poor can be heard and their lives and interests defended. The Preferential Option for the Poor is a cornerstone of Catholic Social teaching. Twomey 2005.

<sup>214</sup> Vigil 97, 1990

a martyr and a permanent fixture in the hearts and minds of the Salvadoran people. In the homes of the poor in the cities or the campo all around El Salvador and even in some of the homes of the middle and wealthy classes, Romero's face is almost always present either taped onto a cinderblock wall or in a glass frame, illustrating the extent of his influence.

The message Romero presented was simply to end the repression. Romero stood up for the disappeared and named. He was and remains a symbol of hope for the Salvadoran people. For women in particular, Romero encouraged their participation in the popular organizations and specifically supported the work of Co-Madres, encouraging them to stand up for their rights and demand information about their missing and murdered loved ones. Romero's support of women in popular organizations was crucial for women in El Salvador. Not only was Romero a symbol of hope for Salvadoran women who have been told to do nothing but comply with their sufferings, but he supported and encouraged them to not simply sit by and accept the disappearance and death of their loved ones. He listed those disappeared and he encouraged women, Co-Madres, to embrace a new role, a role of direct involvement and resistance demanding information about their disappeared loved ones, and a role in direct contradiction to the grieving and accepting model presented to women by Marianismo. To the new organic national narrative Romero contributes an example of religiosity and faith that embraces equality and direct resistance to social unjust by both men and women.

**Maria Teresa Tula**

Maria Teresa Tula is another important emerging national hero in El Salvador who contradicts the previously embraced Marianismo model and contributes to the construction of the new organic national narrative. She embodies the values the feminist organizations are proliferating and is a role model for women in El Salvador. The violent social and political situation in El Salvador pushed her to become a leader pushing past stereotypes and setting a new trend for women in politics in El Salvador. Tula joined CO-MADRES after her husband was put in jail for leading a strike at a sugar mill. She began small, timid, and questioning her actions, however, grew to become a prominent, widely known and praised defender of human rights. Tula confronted the worst aspects of the Salvadoran conflict. She was kidnapped, raped several times, and beaten due to her organizing activities. Despite these threats, Tula, once shy and timid, continued her work with CO-MADRES with courage and perseverance.

Many women in El Salvador during the years of the conflict and today faced poverty, domestic abuse, and rape in their everyday lives. As mentioned in chapter 2, Sister Margarita Navarro, a representative of the Human Rights Commission for El Salvador, stated that “ A woman in the hands of the death squads is always raped, and this applies for women of all ages. Domestic violence by men against women and by women against children during the conflict also increased.<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, the fear of violence also directly impacted the economic situation for the civilian women Previous to the example of Tula, women when facing poverty, domestic abuse, rape, and economic injustice were told to simply accept their suffering as it was their call and burden as

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<sup>215</sup> Kumar 2001, 15

women. However, Tula provides a different example as how to respond to situations of suffering and violence.

Tula, motivated by her own sense of justice, moved to confront the military, government officials, and her own tortures in the battle for human rights. Through Tula's work with Co-Madres she began to eventually see and assert her value and rights as a woman. Rather than accepting suffering, Tula rejects the notion that men and women are unequal and thus rejects the notion that violence against women is acceptable. Rather than suffering in silence, Tula demonstrates to women that regardless of what society has dictated, the perfect woman to be, a Salvadoran woman is capable and should stand up for herself and demand her rights. Inherent in her assertion that violence against women is not acceptable and women must stand up for their rights lies the notion that women can and should involve themselves in social issues and should organize. No longer is popular organizing out of the question for women. Tula continues her work as a human rights activist with Co-MADRES and her work and life serve as examples for other women in El Salvador today.

### **Ana Guadalupe Martínez**

The work and life of Romero, as well as his support of the women's organizations demonstrates that women need no longer suffer in silence. The example of Maria Teresa Tula solidifies this notion and illustrates that women can and should organize in an effort to demand their rights. Ana Guadalupe Martínez, although not directly connected to any of the feminist organization, extends the role of women in Salvadoran society even

further. Martinez, a medical student turned activist became the second in command of the Ejercito Revolucionario Del Pueblo, the second largest organization that made up the FMLN, in 1980.<sup>216</sup> In the following decade she was elected to the Legislative Assembly.<sup>217</sup> "She is extraordinarily brave," another guerilla remarked about her. "In difficult moments in combat, she can be very serene and self-confident. But when she is not in the field fighting, she is very sensitive and sweet and feminine."<sup>218</sup> Gonzales demonstrates that not only did women participate in the Civil War through the popular organization, but also through their participation as armed combatants. Women looking to Gonzales as a role model see that they can participate actively in political organizations and can take more active roles in society.

The homes of campesinos and the poor in Salvadoran society are sparse, however, on the walls of many next to large painted FMLN signs are photos and representations of Oscar Romero, Tula, and Gonzales. These three, are only three of many new role models and heroes of El Salvador that present women with a new perspective on what it means to be a woman in Salvadoran society. No longer must women look to Mary as their only example for womanhood. No longer must they accept suffering and the cruelty of men with submissiveness, they are now free to embrace the notion of resistance. Romero, Tula, and Gonzales provide positive images of resistance and promote active participation in political and social organizing and the demanding of the rights of women.

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<sup>216</sup> Ejercito Revolucionario Del Pueblo or The People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) was formed in 1971 by dissident Christian Democrats and other leftist and became the second largest organization that made of the FMLN.

<sup>217</sup> Interview, July 29, 1996, Kampwirth 66

<sup>218</sup> Andriotakis, 1981, 1-2



In combination Romero, Tula, and Gonzales tell a new story, the new narrative of what a woman and citizen of El Salvador can be. These new heroes, not only contradict the socially mandated roles and provide new role models for women, but also embody the ideas of resistance, respect, equality, and responsibility that the feminist organizations are infusing throughout Salvadoran society. It is through the examination of the new values of the feminist organizations and their implementation that most clearly demonstrates the feminist organizations' effective creation of a new nation in El Salvador.

### **The Impact of Legislation**

The feminist organizations are beginning to impact legislation, which has, in turn, begun to mandate and infuse new national values into the new organic national narrative. Two crucial values and areas where the feminist organizations have had impressive successes include social and political justice. As the feminist organizations infuse these new values into society, values that are embodied by the new national heroes, it is the legislation that mandates their incorporation into Salvadoran society.

### **Social Justice**

The feminist organizations are also infusing the notion of social justice into the fabric of Salvadoran society. Social justice refers to the creation of a society based on the ideals of equality and solidarity and in El Salvador specifically, works towards emphasizing the universal value of human life and the acceptance of human dignity for all. One social justice issue ever present in El Salvador is the issue of domestic violence. In Salvadoran society, domestic violence against women has been deemed socially

acceptable and the norm in every day life. Domestic violence is the most recurring form of violence in individual life, however under the hierarchy of violence, domestic violence is considered less legitimate than other forms of violence such as gang violence.<sup>219</sup> This represents a gendered misrepresentation of violence and illustrates the context in which women's voice have been historically silenced. This is demonstrated by the constant efforts on the part of the government to reduce gang violence, through various anti gang legislation, and a lack of legislation passed addressing the issue of domestic violence.

Women have revealed brutal experiences of violence in the private sphere usually at the hands of parents and male partners. "Violence was used with alarming regularity and with tremendous force with in familial relations".<sup>220</sup> However, the feminist organizations are challenging the notion that domestic violence is acceptable and instead promoting the value of equality between men and women through workshops and legislation to promote less violence. As social justice fights for equality and the recognition of the value of all life, the feminist organizations are demanding that the human rights of women be recognized and valued. . Legislation regarding domestic violence passed through the cooperation of feminist organizers as well as right wing legislators. The dedication of right wing legislators is evident in regards to this issue. The fight against domestic violence received strong support from Salguero Gross, a right wing Congresswoman, who had committed herself to the issue and felt as if she had a personal responsibility to get Bills passed on the issue.

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<sup>219</sup> Hume 2007, 482

<sup>220</sup> Hume 2007, 484

On November 24, 1994 the Legislative Assembly declared a National Day of No Violence Against Women for November 25. The Assembly also ratified the OAS Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence Against Women on August 23, 1995. Continuing this trend against domestic violence, in 1996 the Legislature approved the Law Against Violence, which allows members of the community to inform police of suspected cases of domestic violence and permits police to enter homes and make arrests based on the testimony of the plaintiff or of the neighbors. It also allows victims to file restraining orders against aggressors, established special units within the National Civilian Police that re staffed with personnel trained in domestic violence issues, and encourages the establishment of temporary shelters for victims.<sup>221</sup>

With this new legislation, the feminist organizations as well as the women on the right are demonstrating that domestic violence is no longer acceptable. Although their work is incomplete and domestic violence is still common, these laws are an important step in infusing the new Salvadoran nation with the value of equality and respect between men and women.

### **Political Justice**

With social justice, the feminist organizations are also placing special emphasis on political justice and have already had several strategic successes. Key to the value of political justice is the political participation of women. In El Salvador, men have traditionally held about 90% of the country's public offices. This issue of political

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<sup>221</sup> Hipsher, Gonzales 2001 152-154

inequality has thus been a long-standing area of injustice between men and women. This issue has therefore, been one of great focus for not only the feminist organizations in El Salvador, but also women on the right side of the political spectrum as well.<sup>222</sup> The feminist organizations argue that it is not simply men who are capable of participating in the political process. As men and women are equal, equal participation and influence in the government should be a valued aspect of society.

The area of political inclusion is another area in which legislation has mandated the infusion of the value of political equality between men and women into Salvadoran society. A crucial milestone for feminism and the inclusion of women in politics in El Salvador came in 1993 with Mujeres 94.<sup>223</sup> In 1993, between 28 and 40 women's organizations joined forces to gain a voice in national politics and sought to include feminist issues in the presidential electoral campaign. Mujeres 94 was thus a political platform developed by working with various women's organizations on issues such as women and violence, health, education, environment, work, legislation, development, land, and political parties. Mujeres 94 created a unique experience for many women and "for the first time we could breath in a space where there was democracy. Nobody told us, do this... That filled us with immense joy".<sup>224</sup>

Within the platform there was no hierarchy and no party officials. It operated solely through democratic vote. Within the platform there were a total of 14 demands. The first 9 were considered feminist demands as they posed a direct challenge to power

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<sup>222</sup> Women on the right side of the political spectrum are women who are affiliated with the conservative characteristics of the ARENA Party.

<sup>223</sup> Women 94 Platform

<sup>224</sup> Public Talk on Mujeres 94, March 1994, Kampwirth 2004, 92

dynamics between men and women.<sup>225</sup> These demands included “comprehensive sex education without prejudice, free and voluntary motherhood, and fifty percent of leadership position for women”. The other three of these demands were considered gender demands as they sought to improve the situation women face, yet did not directly challenge the power inequality.<sup>226</sup> These demands included the “stabilization of food prices and more and better public hospitals”.<sup>227</sup> The final two demands were considered either feminist or gender demands depending on the interpretation.<sup>228</sup> Following the formation of these demands, a signing ceremony took place on March 9<sup>th</sup> where the “final version of the platform was signed by Ruben Zamora, of the leftist coalition, and Gloria Salguero Gross of the right wing ARENA party”.<sup>229</sup> Thus, with these signatures, Mujeres 94 achieved its partisan goals by gaining the endorsement of the two largest and most powerful of the two political parties in the country. The creation of this platform was an important step in the insertion of women into the political system in El Salvador.

However, despite the apparent success of Mujeres 94 and the significant of this achievement for the feminist movement, the response from the FMLN and ARENA parties was less supportive than it initially appeared. In reference to ARENA, one week after signing Mujeres 94, ARENA celebrating the grand closing of the women’s crusade.

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<sup>225</sup> Feminist Theory directly and openly challenges the power inequalities between men and women. A feminism demand is therefore a demand for something, such as political, that directly challenges the previously held division of power between men and women.

<sup>226</sup> Gender Theory strives to improve the situation for women within their traditional roles in society. This theory does not challenge the traditional gender divisions of power and strives to meet basic needs such as food, water, and shelter. Gender demands are therefore demands that would improve the situation women faced, such as availability of clean drinking water, yet would not challenge the power balance between men and women.

<sup>227</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 93

<sup>228</sup> Hipsher, Gonzales, 2001, 152-153

<sup>229</sup> Kampwirth 2004, 93

The wives of the presidential and vice presidential candidates presented a document that they argued contained “the principle necessities and aspiration of the Salvadoran woman”.<sup>230</sup> In this document women were promised subsidies for mother- infant programs, the “implementation of a new family code so as to protect women, children and old people” and “nutritious rations for pregnant mothers and their children”.<sup>231</sup> However this clearly- gendered declaration demonstrated a profound opposition to all that was demanded in the Mujeres 94 platform. Therefore, although the signing of Mujeres 94 on behalf of the ARENA party “represented a small step forward in feminist influence within right wing- party politics in El Salvador”, the actions following the signing of the platform illustrated the continued dedication of the right to the traditional power inequalities between men and women.

The FMLN, on the other hand, appeared much more willing to address issues that arose in Mujeres 94. The FMLN explicitly addressed the problem of discrimination against women. Leaflets distributed by the FMLN promised to fulfill many of the feminist demands and were also filled with progressive images of gender relations to address the high rate of illiteracy among the people of El Salvador. Therefore, the FMLN appeared much more willing to identify themselves with the feminist organizations and with Mujeres 94. Although, this political platform had limited success in its implementation, the creation of the platform and endorsement of it by the FMLN singled a huge success for the feminist movement in El Salvador and for the effort towards

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<sup>230</sup> Advertisement in El Diario de Hoy, March 15, 1944, Kampwirth 2004, 93

<sup>231</sup> Soro et al. 1994, 31-32, Kampwirth 2004, 94

including women in politics. The success of the feminist organizations in their fight for political involvement and equality did not stop with Mujeres 94.

Through the combined efforts of the right wing women and feminist organizations the Electoral Code was created which was designed to “guarantee the incorporation of women in the political and public life of the country”.<sup>232</sup> It created a one third quota for women’s participation in political parties and public office. Gloria Salguero Gross, the President of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, one of the largest landowners, and a prominent leader of the right wing ARENA party as well as the former First Lady Elizabeth Calderon Sol are both examples of female right wing legislatures who were committed to the fight for equality in political participation. The main obstacle for the Electoral Code was resistance from conservative male legislators and attorneys who argued that the reform violated the Salvadoran Constitution and discriminated against men. However, with the combination of forces from the right and left, the establishment of the Electoral Code was successful and the one-third quota for female participation in politics has been implemented.<sup>233</sup>

### **Limited Success: Economic Justice and Freedom of Choice**

The feminist organizations have also spent significant time and energy addressing issues of economic injustice and issues surrounding freedom of choice. Although, the feminist organizations have had limited success in passing legislation in these areas, their effort and attempt to mandate values of economic justice and freedom over one’s body

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<sup>232</sup> Hipsher, Gonzales 2001, 152

<sup>233</sup> Hipsher, Gonzales 2001, 152-153

are crucial to the new organic national narrative the feminist organizations are creating in El Salvador.

Women in Salvadoran society are often underpaid; face a lack of job security, unsafe working conditions, and sexual harassment in the economic sphere. Women face a particular economic injustice in the factories located in the Free Trade Zones.<sup>234</sup>

Although factories in Free Trade Zones provide employment and help Salvadoran citizens maintain a minimal level of economic stability, the low salaries they provide prevent economic growth and encircle the people in a constant cycle of poverty. The factories exploit women by forcing them to work weeks of 50 to 80 hours with salaries of only a few dollars a day. With this, women face job insecurity, exposure to toxic substances without protection, human rights violations, sexual harassment and rape by their supervisors. In the opinion of the feminist organizations, these economic conditions are unacceptable. Thus in response to this situation of economic injustice, the feminist organizations are promoting the value of economic justice and fairness for women.

Several feminist organizations are working to reform laws surrounding Free Trade Zones due to the devastating impact these zones have on women specifically. The Reform proposed would establish a fund into which industries located in these zones would have to make contributions designed to pay backed wages to employees from entrepreneurs when they close up and leave their operation leaving their workers uncompensated. This is clearly a feminist issue as women make up 79% of workers in these factories.

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<sup>234</sup> Free Trade Zones refer to geographically delimited areas in which industries enjoy freedom from duties and customs as their products are destined solely for export.



However, the intense opposition to this issue especially from right wing women has prevented the passing of any bills that would alleviate the negative consequences of the free trade zones. Despite this lack of success, the feminist fight for economic justice in the free trade zones is another example of a value the feminist organizations are attempting to infuse into the new nation forming in El Salvador.

The feminist organizations have also had limited success with passing legislation regarding abortion and freedom of choice. Although the feminist organizations are not all in agreement on their positions on abortion, the feminist organizations as whole call for, not necessarily the legalization of abortion, but some freedom of choice over their bodies. With freedom of choice over one's body, the feminist organizations acknowledge the need for sex education beginning in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. For the organizations, education on sexual and reproductive rights as well as birth control and sexually transmitted infections are essential for El Salvador.

They argued that education should analyze the human experience and provide a new perspective on gender relations. This type of education would provide women and girls with an understanding of themselves and their sexuality, rather rejecting the concept of women as sexual beings. A sexual education would provide women and girls in El Salvador with an understanding of themselves as women rather than just as mothers as well as inform them on topics of safety, birth control, and sexual transmitted infections. Therefore the feminist organizations are promoting the value of freedom of choice and education for one's body.

Despite their efforts to infuse this value of freedom over one's body, the feminist organizations have had little success through legislation. On April 26, 1997 the Legislative Assembly voted 58 to 26 to eliminate Article 137, which would have allowed abortions when necessary to save the life of the mother, when the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, or when it was presumed that the fetus would be born with grave deformity, from the New Penal Code and to impose stiff penalties on physicians and others who performed abortions. The performing of an abortion would result to 6 to 12 years in prison and the loss of one's medical license, a sentence much stricter than any man faces for domestic violence. Although, they faced defeat in 1997 the feminist organizations continue to work towards building a nation where a woman has more freedom of choice over her body and more education on her sexuality.

The legislative success of the feminist organizations regarding domestic violence and the political inclusion of women illustrate how the feminist organizations are beginning to impact legislation in El Salvador, which mandates their new national values, specifically social justice and political justice into society. Despite, a lack of legislative success in regards to economic justice and freedom of choice, the feminist organizations continue to fight for legislation, which embodies and propagates the new values they wish to incorporate into the new organic national narrative.

### **Conclusion: The Feminist Organizations and the New Nation**

A new nation is emerging in El Salvador and it is the feminist organizations that are constructing and most effectively influencing the narrative that will characterize

Salvadoran society into the future. The feminist organizations are working together in El Salvador to empower women, to aid them in their material needs, to demand equality, to demand rights, and to end violence. The feminist organizations are realigning the national values of El Salvador and creating a new nation through the reconstruction of gender roles, through the recognition and promotion of new nation heroes, and through their legislative impact which has begun to mandate new values such as social and political justice in society. These organizations, through their work, are not only improving the lives of Salvadoran women today, but are effectively influencing and writing the organic narrative of the El Salvador that will impact women into the future.

## Epilogue

Already less than twenty years after the bloody Salvadoran Civil War and the numerous decades in which blatant injustice and oppression in El Salvador took root, the feminist organizations have already made great strides in creating a new nation based on respect, equality, and justice. The timing of this success is especially relevant as the injustice that was inherent in Salvadoran society was in place for hundreds of years. Despite the deep-rooted nature of this injustice, in less than twenty years following the end Civil War, the feminist organizations have broken down barriers and begun to create a new organic nation in El Salvador. The success of the feminist organizations in reference to the reconstruction of gender roles, the proliferation of new national heroes, and issues of domestic violence and female participation in politics is a testament to the incredible success of these organizations, but also to the impact and influence the feminist organizations are having on the government.

The feminist organizations have not only impacted daily life for women and children, but they have also greatly impacted the way the government now governs El Salvador. These acts of legislation could not have been passed without the pressure of the feminist organizations and the ratification of these acts demonstrates that not only are the feminist organizations influencing society at large, but they are also influencing and directing the decision-making process of the government. Although it has been less than twenty years from the end of the Civil War, the work and success of the feminist

organizations is paramount in El Salvador. A new nation is emerging and it is the feminist organizations that are constructing and most effectively influencing the narrative that will characterize Salvadoran society into the future.

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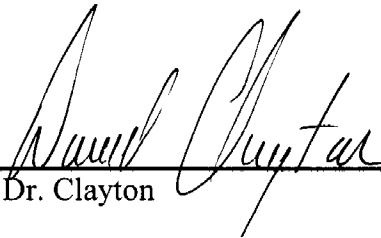
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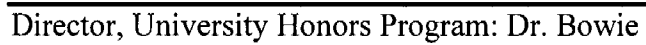
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Vicki Gonzales", written over a horizontal line.

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